

Ethnic cleansing, genocide and the Tawergha

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Human Rights Investigations has been following the situation of the Tawergha closely and here we draw the information together and find, based on the reports of witnesses, journalists and human rights workers, the situation of the Tawergha is not just one of ethnic cleansing but, according to the legal definition, genocide.

HRI has grave concerns, not only for dark-skinned people in Libya generally, but also for pro-Gaddafi tribes including the Gaddafa and [al-Meshashyas](#). We also have particular concern for the Tuareg of southern Libya who are being accused of being ‘mercenaries’ and under attack from NATO and rebel forces. But the greatest concern is perhaps for the Tawergha.

The Genocide Convention

Article 2 of the United Nations issued Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide states:

“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such:

- 1. Killing members of the group;*
- 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*

4. *Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*

5. *Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”*

Article 4 states:

Persons committing genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in Article 3 shall be punished, whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials or private individuals.

The Tawargha have been ethnically cleansed

The main town of the Tawergha region, Tawergha itself (aka Tawargha, Tawurgha. Arabic: تاورغاء), was a town of an estimated 31,250 people ([United Nations Environment Program](#), 2005). It has been emptied of its entire population: its people having either been killed or fled, amidst reports the remaining population in the area are being picked off as they try to find water and food. The town of Tawergha lies about 30-40 miles south of Misrata/Misurata, along the western coast of the Gulf of Sirte. Areas of Misrata occupied by the Tawargha have also been ethnically cleansed, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Amnesty has reported on the allegations [‘that members of the Tawargha tribe’](#) have fled their homes and:

Tens of thousands are now living in different parts of Libya – unable to return home as relations between the people of Misratah and Tawargha remain particularly tense. Residents of makeshift camps near Tripoli, where displaced people from Tawargha are sheltering, told Amnesty they would not go outside for

fear of arrest. They told how relatives and others from the Tawargha tribe had been arrested from checkpoints and even hospitals in Tripoli.

On 29 August, Amnesty delegates saw a Tawargha patient at the Tripoli Central Hospital being taken by three men, one of them armed, for “questioning in Misratah”. The men had no arrest warrant. Amnesty was also told that at least two other Tawargha men had vanished after being taken for questioning from Tripoli hospitals...

Even in the camps, the Tawarghas are not safe. Towards the end of last month, a group of armed men drove into the camp and arrested about 14 men. Amnesty spoke to some of their relatives; none knew of their fate or whereabouts. Another woman at the camp said her husband has been missing since he left the camp to run an errand in central Tripoli, about a week ago. She fears he might be have been detained.

Tawergha who fled to refugee camps have been chased down by rebel groups, taken away and disappeared. There are credible reports of Tawerghans being raped, disappearing and being killed. Tawerghans have even been witnessed being dragged out of hospitals in Tripoli to unknown fates.

The early genocidal threats to Tawergha

In a June 21 [article](#) in the Wall Street Journal, Sam Dagher described Tawergha as a town inhabited mostly by black Libyans, a legacy of its 19th-century origins as a transit town in the slave trade. He quoted one of the rebel commanders from the rebel Misrata brigade:

Ibrahim al-Halbous, a rebel commander leading the fight near Tawergha, says all remaining residents should leave once if his fighters capture the town. “They should pack up,” Mr. Halbous said. “Tawergha no longer exists, only Misrata.”

Other rebel leaders are reported as:

“calling for drastic measures like banning Tawergha natives from ever working, living or sending their children to schools in Misrata.”

In addition, according to the article, as a result of the battle for Misrata:

nearly four-fifths of residents of Misrata’s Ghoushi neighborhood were Tawergha natives. Now they are gone or in hiding, fearing revenge attacks by Misratans, amid reports of bounties for their capture.

The demonization of the Tawergha

An important part of any genocide is the demonisation and dehumanisation of the victims and this continues to be the case for the Tawergha. As part of the information war NATO and the rebels have described all loyalist black fighters, guest workers from sub-Saharan Africa and even black skinned inhabitants of Libya as ‘mercenaries’ [Arabic: مرتزقة Romanisation: *mertezqah* or ‘*murtazaka*’].

The Tawerghans have been accused of mass rape, of being collectively responsible for the battle of Misrata and are invariably described in racist terms. As Sam Dagher reported:

Some of the hatred of Tawergha has racist overtones that were mostly latent before the current conflict. On the road between Misrata and Tawergha, rebel slogans like “the brigade for purging slaves, black skin” have supplanted pro-Gadhafi scrawl.

It is worth noting that this demonisation of black people has led to widespread atrocities including [lynchings](#) and [beheadings](#) in which the highest echelons of the National Transitional Council have been complicit.

Tawergha is captured by the rebels

As [we reported at the time](#), the town of Tawergha was taken by the rebels on 13 August in an assault which was closely coordinated with NATO and featured the use of aerial bombing and of heavy weaponry against the town.

Here is video of the battle from the rebel side:

A report of the fall by Andrew Simmons for Al Jazeera, unfortunately lacking context, shows at least one of the large residential blocks in Tawergha alight, prisoners packed inside a freight container (who the rebels didn't want filmed), an injured man in civilian clothes and the rebel fighters evicting an Egyptian woman who has lost her 9 children under 12 who ran away during the attack from her home.

At this stage the last remaining civilians and defenders of the town were reportedly surrounded.

The attack on Tawergha was also reported by Orla Guerin of the BBC who also, disgracefully, failed to give the ethnic cleansing context

despite actually interviewing Ibrahim al-Halbous, the very commander who had earlier threatened to wipe the town off the map.

NATO air support for the assault on Tawergha

The NATO bombing in support of the attack is recorded in the NATO press releases from the time:

10 August: In the vicinity of Tawurgha: 3 Command and Control Nodes, 2 Military Storage Facilities.

12 August: In the vicinity of Misratha: 1 Military Facility, 1 Ammo Storage Facility.

13 August: In the vicinity of Misratah: 4 Anti-Aircraft Guns.

13 August: In the vicinity of Tawurgah: 2 Military Vehicles, 1 Anti-Aircraft Guns.

The actual assault was from 10-13 August so we can see NATO played an important role in the ethnic cleansing of this town, an ethnic cleansing of which they had been forewarned and in which they decided, nonetheless, to participate.

Reports indicate the rebels were ordered by NATO to paint their vehicles red and yellow just prior to the assault.

The ethnic cleansing of Tawargha

It is highly likely many black refugees from Misrata fled to the town of Tawergha. Many of them and the original residents may have moved on prior to the actual assault, especially as the Misrata brigades were firing Grad rockets at the town. It also seems likely some of the

fighters may have escaped to Sabha, Sirte or Bani Walid, where they are currently making a last stand, sure in the knowledge that they are unlikely to survive capture.

However, a report by David Enders, reporting from an empty Tawergha, indicates ethnic cleansing occurred after the rebels took full control:

*According to Tawergha residents, rebel soldiers from Misrata forced them from their homes on **Aug. 15** when they took control of the town. (Our emphasis)*

This would have been 2 days after the fall of the town and after Orla Guerin and Andrew Simmons had left. The fate of the prisoners loaded into the shipping containers, as well as the population as a whole remains unknown.

Following the trail of the last of the Tawerghans

To his great credit David Enders follows up on the story of the Tawerghans, (17th September) trying to trace their current location:

The residents were then apparently driven out of a pair of refugee camps in Tripoli over this past weekend.

“The Misrata people are still looking for black people,” said Hassan, a Tawergha resident who’s now sheltering in a third camp in Janzour, six miles east of Tripoli.

“One of the men who came to this camp told me my brother was killed yesterday by the revolutionaries.”

The evidence that the rebels' pursuit of the Tawerghis did not end with the collapse of the Gadhafi regime is visible, both in the emptiness of this village and that of the camps to which the residents fled.

At one, in a Turkish-owned industrial complex in the Salah al Deen neighborhood of southern Tripoli, a man looting metal from the complex simply said that the Tawerghis had "gone to Niger," the country that borders Libya on the south where some Gadhafi supporters, including the deposed dictator's son Saadi, have fled.

It is worth noting that to get to Niger, any refugees would have had to make an extremely hazardous journey to Sabha first. From there it would have been a further weeks journey by bus into Niger, across the Sahara: another very dangerous journey which it is highly unlikely any of the refugees would have even attempted let alone survived.

David Enders report continues:

Lafy Mohammed, whose house is across the road from the complex, said that on Saturday a group of revolutionary militiamen from Misrata, 120 miles east of Tripoli, had come to the camp and evicted its tenants.

"They arrested about 25 of the men," Mohammed said. "They were shooting in the air and hitting them with their rifle butts."

"They took the women, old men and children out in trucks," he said.

Mohammed said that it was not the first time the revolutionaries from Misrata had come after the people in the camp.

“A week ago they were here, but (the people in the neighborhood) begged them to leave them alone,” Mohammed said.

Mohammed said some of the Tawerghis may have been taken to another nearby camp, in a Brazilian-owned industrial complex. On Tuesday, that camp was empty as well, with the gate locked.

Reached by phone at the camp in Janzour, Hassan, who did not want his last name used, said he had escaped from the Brazilian company camp on Saturday, when it, too, was raided. He said about 1,000 Tawerghis were now at the Janzour camp.

“They arrested 35 men, but they let me go because I was with my family,” Hassan said. He blamed a brigade of fighters from Misrata.

In Tawergha, the rebel commander said his men had orders not to allow any of the residents back in. He also said that unexploded ordnance remained in the area, though none was readily apparent.

Most homes and buildings in the area appeared to have been damaged in the fighting, and a half-dozen appeared to have been ransacked. The main road into the village was blocked with earthen berms. Signs marking the way to the village appeared to have been destroyed.

On the only sign remaining “Tawergha” had been painted over with the words “New Misrata.”

On one wall in Tawergha, graffiti referred to the town’s residents as “abeed,” a slur for blacks.

Mass graves abound



A bulldozer filling a mass grave with bodies

Since the collapse of the Gaddafi government in western Libya in late August 2011, mass graves containing the bodies of people killed during the conflict have been reported on a weekly basis in Tripoli and other areas, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

A [communications intercept](#) between a rebel commander from Misrata and Colonel Ahmed Bani suggests the mass graves of “pro-Gaddafi soldiers” which “are not to be talked about.” Relatives have testified to the murder and disappearances of their menfolk and in one instance the suicide of a young woman who wished to avoid being raped.

Human Rights Watch have expressed their concern about the rebels interfering with mass graves which will make forensic work to discover the perpetrators of massacres difficult.

According to Amnesty International the Libyan soldiers “executed for refusing to kill protesters” in Al-Baida were in fact murdered and filmed for the world’s media by the rebels, which only came to light because amateur video of the victims whilst in rebel custody surfaced.

So we can have no faith in the rebel authorities investigating their own crimes.

Mahmoud Jibril’s complicity in the crime of genocide

Sam Dagher of the [Wall Street Journal](#) reported September 18th that Mahmoud Jibril, the National Transitional Council Prime Minister, rubber-stamped the wiping of the town off the map in a public meeting at the Misrata town hall:

“Regarding Tawergha, my own viewpoint is that nobody has the right to interfere in this matter except the people of Misrata.”

“This matter can’t be tackled through theories and textbook examples of national reconciliation like those in South Africa, Ireland and Eastern Europe,” he added as the crowd cheered with chants of “Allahu Akbar,” or “God is greatest.”

The WSJ goes on to report:

Now, rebels have been torching homes in the abandoned city 25 miles to the south. Since Thursday, The Wall Street Journal has witnessed the burning of more than a dozen homes in the city Col. Gadhafi once lavished with money and investment. On the gates of many vandalized homes in the country’s only coastal city dominated by

dark-skinned people, light-skinned rebels scrawled the words “slaves” and “negroes.”

“We are setting it on fire to prevent anyone from living here again,” said one rebel fighter as flames engulfed several loyalist homes.

People to contact

This is of course a highly politically inconvenient genocide, and it is therefore of great importance that our readers attempt to bring the attention of the world to this issue.

Here are some suggestions and we welcome others:

Tweet this article using the button below!

UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/contactform.asp?address=1>

The International Criminal Court

International Criminal Court

Office of the Prosecutor

[Communications](#)

Post Office Box 19519

2500 CM The Hague

The Netherlands.

Email to: otp.informationdesk@icc-cpi.int,

Facsimile to: +31 70 515 8555

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
(OHCHR)

Palais des Nations

CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 22 917 9220

Email: InfoDesk@ohchr.org

The US Department of State

<http://contact-us.state.gov/app/ask>

Other organisations: The ICRC, Amnesty International, members of the UN (see the [stop bombing email campaign for emails](#))

We would also ask our readers to keep us informed

- 1) Of responses to the genocide as we are tracking those who are attempting to deny, justify and minimise these crimes and those in positions of authority who remain silent or give moral and political support to the guilty parties.
- 2) Further developments in the position of the Tawerghans.
- 3) The movements of;
 - a) Mahmoud Jibril,

- b) rebel commanders Ali Ahmed al Sheh, Ibrahim al-Halbous, Abdul Hassan of the Al Horia Brigade and
- c) NATO commander Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard.
- 4) the stipulations of the relevant national laws implementing the Genocide Convention.

There should be no impunity for war criminals.

(PS – It is worth noting that Ibrahim al-Halbous, one of the rebel commanders involved, was paralyzed after being injured during fighting on Sunday 18 September according to a spokesman for the Misurata media committee.)