Middle East/North Africa - Libya

Media under pressure
News providers targeted in new wave of violence sweeping Libya
11 August 2014

For the past month, Libya has been in the grip of some of the worst violence since the 17 February 2011 revolution which led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. There have been many civilian casualties and those working in the media have not been spared.

Since July 13, violent armed clashes have been taking place in Tripoli between the rival Zintan and Misrata militias and their allies for control of the capital's international airport, among other things.

Fierce fighting has been taking place in and around the city of Benghazi between the forces of General Khalifa Haftar and armed Islamist militias such as Ansar Al-Shari'a. On 30 July, Ansar Al-Shari'a managed to capture the base camp of a Haftar-allied special forces unit, whose members were forced to withdraw into the Jebal Akhdar mountains in the east of the country.

More than 200 people have been killed and 1,000 wounded since the latest round of violence began, according to health ministry figures. Most of the casualties were caused by the shelling of civilian areas. Amnesty International has categorized these indiscriminate shelling attacks as war crimes.

Those working in the media have not been spared in the latest fighting. Three days ago, five staff members of the satellite station *Barqa TV*, based in Ajdabiya, were abducted on their way back from covering the opening ceremony of the new Libyan parliament. The station's manager, **Faraj Al-Moghrabi**, who was also present, said the station's three cars, carrying the eight members of the crew, were stopped at a checkpoint near the town of Derna, known to be the stronghold of Ansar Al-Shari'a, by militiamen who indicated they were members of the national army under Haftar's command. According to Al-Moghrabi, however, the militiamen's clothes and accent rather implied that they were from the opposing camp.

They ordered the journalists to get out of their cars at gunpoint. Another of the cars, carrying the station manager, a technician and cameraman, managed to drive off despite coming under fire. Editor **Khaled Al-Sibihi**, presenter **Yunes Al-Mabrouk Al-Moghrabi**, reporters **Abdelsalam Al-Moghrabi** and **Yussef Al-Qumudi**, and Egyptian video editor **Mohamad Jalal** were abducted. There has been no news of them since.

On 4 August, the "special deterrence force" militia led by the Islamist Abdel Raouf Kara, urged the staff of the government television station *Al-Wataniya* not to broadcast parliament's inauguration ceremony. To make sure, they made everyone leave the building. According to two *Al-Wataniya* employees, the man in charge of the attack, Abdalazim Al-Shahrani, ordered the staff not to report any events surrounding the new parliament but ordered them to support "Operation Libyan Dawn", launched on 13 July by fighters from Misrata with the aim of seizing control of Tripoli airport from rival militiamen from Zintan.

Three days earlier, three employees of the satellite station *Al-Assima* were abducted in Tripoli's Martyrs' Square after covering a demonstration protesting against the fighting in the capital. According to one staffer, three black Toyotas without plates seized the crew as they were putting away their equipment.

Correspondent **Mohamed Abdelrazaq Hussein**, cameraman **Ahmed Hussein Al-Ulawni** and producer **Ahmed Mohamed Al-Jihad** were taken to an unknown location before being released five hours later in the middle of the night. The TV station said in a statement that the three men were believed to have been held at the Mitiga air base, controlled by Misrata-allied Islamist forces. They were understood to have been tortured and had their heads shaved by their abductors.

Since the 17 February Revolution and the overthrow of Gaddafi, many Libyan journalists have been threatened, assaulted, kidnapped and even killed because of their work. The many incidents of violence between the various factions and armed groups have led to an increase

in violations of freedom of information and attacks on those working in the media. Some have been forced to leave the country for their own safety and others are thinking about it. Since the start of this year, Reporters Without Borders has recorded more than 60 violations of freedom of information and has given support to 10 journalists in exile.

The freedom of information organization calls on all parties taking part in the clashes to halt immediately all attacks on civilians and, more specifically, on those working in the media. Journalists have a vital role to play in the new Libya, especially in building a viable and democratic state with a long-term future.

For their part, news organizations and those working for them must show independence and professionalism and remain fully aware of the responsibilities incumbent on them. News providers must bear in mind their essential role in holding official power to account and avoid exacerbating tension and political divisions.

RWB is aware of the serious difficulties and many challenges the new Libyan parliament faces but recalls, however, that every government has a duty to protect its civilian population. The organization therefore calls on the Libyan authorities to use all means necessary to put a stop to the attacks on news providers and call a halt to impunity by bringing those responsible for such crimes to justice.