

Unfolding Humanitarian Disaster in Tripoli. ICRC Confirms Hundreds of Casualties and Detainees in Tripoli held by Rebels

Libya: ICRC surgical team on its way to Tripoli: 25-08-2011 Operational Update

By [Global Research](#)

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As fighting continues and hospitals struggle to cope with the influx of wounded people, an ICRC surgical team is on its way to Tripoli. Many people have been detained in the city and the ICRC is stepping up efforts to check on their condition.

Hundreds of casualties and detainees in Tripoli

"Fighting is still going on in several parts of the city, notably in and around the Abu Salim area," said George Comninos, the head of the ICRC delegation in Tripoli. "Since Monday we have seen many wounded people in medical facilities and dozens of dead bodies."

A surgical team, comprising a surgeon, an anaesthetist and two nurses, is set to arrive in Libya's capital tomorrow, 26 August, in a convoy that will also bring in more medical supplies. A second team, set up with support from the Finnish Red Cross, should follow a day later.

"So far, we have delivered enough medical supplies to treat at least 500 people, but there are likely to be many more casualties," said Mr Comninos. "We are increasingly concerned about the inability of medical personnel to reach hospitals. Abu Salim Trauma Centre, which is in an area where fighting is taking place, simply cannot function because of a lack of staff."

In recent days, the ICRC has distributed surgical equipment, intravenous fluids, dressing materials and other medical items to treat wounded people in the three main hospitals and in several private clinics in Tripoli. Further distributions will take place over the coming days.

"We have received reports of numerous arrests, including of foreign nationals. We call on the fighters who hold these people to treat them correctly," said Mr Comninos. "Although we have managed to visit some detainees, we need to rapidly obtain access to many more, probably hundreds more. For the time being, many people are in the hands of local commanders. We are intensifying our contacts at all levels to gain access to the detainees and have them brought to well-identified places of detention."

The ICRC is also keeping a close eye on the availability of food and water in the Libyan capital and on the needs of displaced people there. In several parts of the city, the security situation is preventing many people from leaving their homes. In addition, supplies are running short.

In the coming days, the ICRC hopes to be working closely with the Libyan Red Crescent to meet these and other needs.

Medical supplies in short supply throughout the country

“Medical facilities across the country have been hit by shortages of drugs and other medical items,” said Mr Comninos. “There is an urgent need to bring in oxygen and external fixators for fractured limbs. We distributed external fixators last week in three hospitals in Tripoli, but the shortage is huge. We really hope these items can be imported quickly.”

In recent weeks, the ICRC has airlifted 40,000 doses of vaccine against measles to Sabha, in the south-western part of the country. The vaccine is being used in an ongoing programme to immunize people in the area, children especially. The ICRC has also delivered medical supplies in other towns affected by the armed conflict, such as Al Zawiyah, Misrata, Benghazi and several towns in the Jebel Nefusa mountains south of Tripoli.

Dire situation in Brega and elsewhere in the country

Fierce fighting that has taken place around Misrata, mainly in Tawargha and Zlitan, has resulted in new waves of displacement and in large numbers of casualties, mainly among fighters. Hospitals have been under pressure and have had difficulty coping with the many injured people.

ICRC staff today managed to visit Brega, the scene of recent heavy fighting. “It looked like a ghost town,” said Ghafar Bishtawi, an ICRC delegate. “We could only see a few people coming to check on their houses and properties, then returning to Ajdabiya, Benghazi and other towns to which they had fled. There is no water or electricity, which means of course that they cannot return home anytime soon. The hospital is not functional. Nobody is there.”

In Brega and places nearby, such as Bishr and Ras Lanuf, the ICRC and Libyan Red Crescent volunteers assessed the extent of weapon contamination. At checkpoints in and around Brega, they distributed information to raise awareness of the danger posed by unexploded ordnance.

Furthermore, electrical cables were delivered to Al Kufra in the south for emergency repairs and a pump was installed to provide water for 250 families living in Al Beydan.

Assistance for people returning to the Nefusa mountains

Libyan refugees in Tunisia and people displaced within Libya itself are returning to their homes in many areas in the Jebel Nefusa, including Zintan, Nalut and Yefren. The returnees’ lives were disrupted by the armed conflict and they need help starting over again. The ICRC distributed 3,000 hygiene parcels to returnees in Jadu, Nalut and Zintan. Some 18,000 cans of food were also distributed in the same areas to supplement protein intake.

Unexploded ordnance left behind after the heavy fighting in the Nefusa mountains is a constant danger for civilians as they return. An ICRC explosive ordnance disposal team is working to remove the devices from houses and other dwellings, where they are most dangerous. These efforts, combined with awareness-raising in the communities, are intended to prevent civilians from coming into contact with unexploded devices.

In Nalut, electricity was cut for more than a week in early August. With help from the local branch of the Libyan Red Crescent, and working in cooperation with the local authorities and those in neighbouring Tunisia, the ICRC managed to have the power plant restarted. With electricity back, the water supply and the cold chain were restored, and a potentially disastrous situation was averted.

The ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary

"Access for our staff to various parts of Tripoli remains uneven because of the fighting," said Mr Comninos. "However, checkpoint personnel mostly recognize the red cross emblem and are increasingly aware of our neutral humanitarian work. So they let us through. For now, we are more concerned about the access of hospital staff to their workplaces."

Thanks to its recognized role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC managed to evacuate 33 journalists and two other foreign nationals from the Rixos Hotel in Tripoli on 24 August. Those evacuated, who had been unable to leave the hotel for several days, were taken to a safer location.

The ICRC continues to visit ever more people held in three places of detention in Benghazi and in five facilities in Misrata. The aim of the visits is to monitor the conditions in which the detainees are being held and the treatment they receive, and to give them the opportunity to exchange messages with their families.

The ICRC continues to remind all parties to the conflict of their obligation under international humanitarian law to protect civilians, health-care personnel and facilities, and people who are sick or wounded, or detained.

The ICRC now has 60 staff, including 20 expatriates, based in Tripoli, where it has been working since April. It also has permanent offices in Benghazi, Misrata and Jadu in the Nefusa mountains.

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