

Introduction

The use of explosive weapons in Libya's urban areas stands out as a humanitarian concern within the unfolding political crisis. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), mortars, artillery and anti-aircraft ammunition, including missiles,¹ have reportedly been used against civilian demonstrators in town centres and even inside mosques. These are weapons that create blast and fragmentation across an area, and are often unsuitable for use amongst civilian populations even in outright armed conflict. According to medical responders, civilians have sustained horrific injuries as a result of this pattern of violence. As the military abandons its bases, the wide availability of explosive weapons in a collapsing state has grave implications for insecurity in the region.

Explosive weapons used in city centres

In Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, RPGs have reportedly been fired at civilians, artillery used against crowds of protestors, and an anti-aircraft weapon used against demonstrators confronting a military base. In Misrata, Libya's third largest city, residents protecting an airport were attacked with RPGs and mortars, according to a local eyewitness. In Zawiya, 30 miles west of Tripoli, anti-aircraft missiles were reportedly used against a mosque where protesters had been gathered for several days. The UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, has condemned the use of heavy weapons fire in Libya as "unacceptable and horrifying." The use of these explosive weapons in such a context has been widely highlighted as indicating a massive breakdown in standards of humanitarian protection.

Medics: Civilians suffer horrific injuries

The use of an anti-aircraft weapon in Benghazi was described as causing "carnage," with injuries being described as "horrific." Following the RPG and mortar attacks at an airport in Misrata, one eyewitness described



A state security building in Benghazi, containing arms and heavy artillery, is taken over by protestors. 23 February 2011,
Military Photos.net

the distressing pattern of harm inflicted by the explosive weapons:

"They left piles of human remains and swamps of blood...The hospitals are packed with those killed and injured."

Habib al-Obaidi, a surgeon at Benghazi's Al-Jalaa Hospital described one of the dead as having been "obliterated" after being hit in the abdomen by an RPG.

Explosive weapons pose security risk

Despite attempts to prevent opposition forces gaining control of weapons, secret police and civilians in Benghazi have reportedly seized explosives. A *Guardian* report states that thousands of pounds of ammunition, including plastic explosives and rockets, have been brought to Benghazi secret police headquarters. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that protestors had seized weapons caches from abandoned government bases, including RPGs and grenades, and had begun using them around the city. The escalation of explosive weapon use by either side in the violence would likely increase the harm to citizens living in affected areas.

Summary

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is of immediate concern for the protection of civilians in Libya. The availability of large quantities of explosive weapons is also of serious concern for security within the region.

Recommendations

1. All actors should immediately refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas.
2. States, international organisations and NGOs should demand an end to this use.
3. When security allows, urgent action should be taken to ensure the security of explosive ordnance stockpiles to prevent wider proliferation.

Sources

1. Charles Levinson and Tahani Karrar-Lewisley, "Libya unrest spreading," *The Wall Street Journal*, posted by *The Midas Letter*, 20 February 2011, www.midasletter.com/index.php/libya-unrest-growing/
2. Nick Meo, "Libya protests: 140 massacred as Gaddafi sends in snipers to crush dissent," *The Telegraph*, 20 February 2011, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8335934/Libya-protests-140-massacred-as-Gaddafi-sends-in-snipers-to-crush-dissent.html
3. Martin Chulov, "Inside Libya's first free city: Jubilation fails to hide deep wounds," *The Guardian*, 23 February 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/23/inside-libya-benghazi-jubilation
4. Paul Schaeffer & Maggie Michael, "Gadhafi forces strike back at revolt near Tripoli," Associated Press, posted by *Yahoo News*, www.news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110224/ap_on_re_af/af_libya
5. Patrick O'Connor, "Libyan government massacres demonstrators as uprising spreads," *World Socialist Web Site*, 21 February 2011, www.wsws.org/articles/2011/feb2011/lead-f21.shtml

¹ Libya's military capabilities include anti-aircraft missiles, and anti-aircraft guns which use both high explosive and inert rounds. It is unclear from reports whether the ammunition used was explosive or not. However, the impacts described by medical responders are consistent with the pattern of harm usually caused by explosive weapons.