

## **Rights group to Libya: Stop destroying town**

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TRIPOLI, Libya — An international rights group on Wednesday urged the Libyan government to halt the "systematic destruction" of a town whose residents backed ousted dictator Moammar Gadhafi during the country's civil war.

The town of Tawergha was used as a staging ground by Gadhafi's forces to launch attacks on nearby Misrata, Libya's third largest city. After rebels broke the siege of Misrata and overran Tawergha, the town's 40,000 residents fled or were driven out by vengeful rebels. Scores were held in prisons under militias' command in Misrata and Tripoli, where rights groups recorded cases of torture and abuse.

Now the displaced residents live in harsh conditions in refugee camps in Tripoli and Benghazi, representing a challenge to the new Libyan government on achieving national reconciliation and justice.

Human Rights Watch based its report on recent satellite images that showed "arson and targeted demolitions" of Tawergha in an attempt to prevent the residents from coming back, the New York-based group said.

"The forced displacement of roughly 40,000 people, arbitrary detentions, torture and killings are widespread, systematic, and sufficiently organized to be crimes against humanity and should be condemned by the United Nations Security Council," the group said in its report.

"Successive governments in Tripoli and local authorities in Misrata have failed to stop the ongoing persecution of an entire community and the destruction of the town," said Fred Abrahams, special adviser at Human Rights Watch. "This leaves a dark stain on the reputation of a new Libya that claims to respect human rights."

More than 18 months since the end of the conflict that ousted Gadhafi's regime, Libya is awash with weapons, roaming militias, violence and instability.

Security measures have been increased in Tripoli ahead of a key parliament session scheduled Thursday during which lawmakers are expected to discuss the contentious "political isolation law." Militias entered the city in advance of the debate, setting off alarms.

The law, if passed in its current draft, would ban nearly the whole ruling class of Libya, including the leader of the General National Congress and the prime minister from taking a role in politics. It includes anyone who worked with Gadhafi from 1969 until 2011, when he was deposed and killed.

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