

Deadly clashes in southern Libya stoke fears of ethnic violence

By ChidiEllebdou / WissamBenHmid on 06/12/2012



Smoke in a neighbourhood of Koufra, following bombings.

At least 23 people were killed in inter-tribal clashes in the south-eastern Libyan town of Koufra in just two days, on Saturday and Sunday, raising the spectre of an ethnic showdown between members of the Saharan Toubou tribe and the Arab Zwei tribe.

The south-eastern oasis town of Koufra is off-limits for foreign journalists, so information from the area is difficult to verify. [According to the French news agency AFP](#), the killings took place between June 9 and 10. 20 of the 23 dead are believed to be Toubou, and the other three belonged to an armed group called the 'Shield' forces, made up of former rebels from the region of Benghazi that joined the national army after the fall of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The Shield forces were sent to Koufra by the transitional Defence minister amid rising tensions between Toubou and Zwei tribesmen in February.

Toubous are African nomads who traditionally raised livestock in the Saharan border region between Libya and Chad. Along with Berbers and Arab Zweis, they are one of Libya's three main ethnic groups, although they are in the minority.

The ethnic tensions in Koufra emerged well before 2011 the revolution that overthrew Gaddafi. Toubous have long felt discriminated against, and in 2008 staged a failed uprising against the government. Violence has simmered in the region ever since, and is a thorn in the foot of Libya's transitional government ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for July 7.

We have been able to speak with two direct witnesses of the recent clashes. One is Toubou, the other a leader of the Shield forces. They have two very different versions of the fighting and its causes.



Remnants of a house after a bombing.



Caskets of two out of the three killed Shield fighters.

“These clashes are ethnic, not political”

Chidi Ellebdou is a teacher in Koufra and member of the Toubou tribe.

The situation has greatly deteriorated in the past three days. Toubou neighbourhoods have been bombed non-stop for two days and are plunged in a thick cloud of smoke [we could indeed hear what appeared to be bombing sounds in the background as we spoke to Chidi over the phone]. Power lines and phone lines keep getting cut.

This is the third time in two months that Toubous have been attacked by Zwei tribesmen, who now have the support of the Shield force. These clashes are mainly ethnic, not political. We Toubous have always been discriminated against because we are not Arabs. Most of us live in shantytowns, in flimsy huts made of palm branches. Under Gaddafi's rule, our children could not go to school, and adults were stripped of their citizenship (in 1998, Gaddafi declared that Toubous on Libyan soil were in fact Chadian, and therefore did not have the same rights as citizens.)

Nothing has changed since Gaddafi's fall. Although we too fought against his regime, we received no acknowledgement from the transitional government. And when fighting broke out in Koufra a few months ago, the government sent militiamen instead of real soldiers. These rebels, for the most part, are young and irresponsible. Some even climbed to the top of minarets to shoot! Although they were supposedly sent to keep the peace, they have allied with Zwei fighters against us. They evacuated injured Zwei fighters by helicopter on Sunday, and left ours behind. Ours are being treated in Koufra's hospital under very poor conditions. This constant discrimination against us feels a lot like ethnic cleansing.

“We are not on anyone’s side”

Wissam Ben Hmid is the leader of the ‘Shield’ forces that were sent to Koufra last February.

“The fighting began on Saturday at dawn when armed youths attacked our camp and killed three of our fighters. They only carried light artillery, and fled to Toubou neighbourhoods. That’s why we attacked Toubou neighbourhoods and not Zwei ones. But now we have restored order and the bombings are over.

We are not allied with any specific tribe; we are not on anyone’s side. Today, we declared a cease-fire and asked the fighters to bring us their wounded to be evacuated by helicopter.”