

Libya east-west highway cut by armed militia

Armed units say they will stay in place until Cyrenaica, Libya's oil-rich eastern province, is given more seats in new parliament

By: Chris Stephen



The road to Ras Lanuf in Libya. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

The main highway linking east and west Libya has been cut by armed militia demanding changes to the rules of the country's national elections due on 7 July.

Armed units backed by vehicles mounted with anti-aircraft guns have cut the highway at Red Wadi, 40 miles from Libya's main oil refinery at Ras Lanuf.

The militia say they will stay in place until Cyrenaica, Libya's oil-rich eastern province, is given a greater distribution of seats in the new national parliament, the national congress.

The region's self-declared Barqa Council – the Arab name for Cyrenaica – is calling for a boycott of the national elections unless seats are shared equally between Libya's three provinces.

The roadblock, which government forces have not opposed, has further raised concerns over doubts over whether Libya can hold free and fair elections on schedule as violence continues in many parts of the country.

Fresh fighting has broken out in the southern town of Kufra, where battles between the indigenous Tibu people and Arab tribes earlier this year left 70 dead.

Tense ceasefires continue around the towns of Zuara and Zintan, where battles cost more than 100 lives earlier this month.

Benghazi has also been the scene of attacks blamed on jihadists, including a rocket attack on the British ambassador's convoy earlier this month.

And the explosion of an improvised explosive device outside the Tunisian consulate in Tripoli on Tuesday night has put many international organisations on edge. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has seen two of its four offices in Libya bombed this month and is reviewing security.

"There are some security incidents that affected several targets," said ICRC head of mission in Libya Georges Comminos. "We have to take certain precautions."

Opposition to Libya's ruling National Transitional Council, which is seen by critics as both secretive and dictatorial, is growing in the main former rebel towns of Benghazi, Misrata and Zintan, each of which has established its own ruling council.

"At the moment, we're protesting over our demands for an equal number of seats in the National General Conference," Brigadier General Hamid Hassi, in charge of the highway roadblock, told the English Language [Libya Herald](#) newspaper. "Libya is currently divided and the best proof of that is that Misrata has now, in effect, a separate government, and Zintan likewise."

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