



UNICEF: Snipers targeting children in Libya city

U.N. relief supplies, doctors arrive in besieged Misrata, where hundreds of people said killed or wounded by Qaddafi forces



GENEVA - The U.N. children's agency says snipers are targeting children in the besieged rebel-held Libyan city of Misrata.

UNICEF spokeswoman Marixie Mercado told reporters in Geneva on Friday that the global body has received "reliable and consistent reports of children being among the people targeted by snipers in Misrata."

She was unable to say how many children have been wounded or killed by snipers in Libya's third-largest city.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it is sending a team to Misrata by boat Friday and would investigate the reports of snipers targeting children.

A spokesman for the Geneva-based aid group, Christian Cardon, told The Associated Press that children and other civilians not involved in hostilities are never a legitimate target in an armed conflict. "But without having any more information, we can't comment on what is happening there," he said.

The U.N. warned of a "dire" situation in the rebels' last major foothold in the Qaddafi-controlled western half of Libya, saying hundreds of people in Misrata have been killed and wounded and that residents are running short of water, food and medicine.

More than 40 days of siege, shelling and sniper fire by Muammar Qaddafi's forces have exacted a bloody price in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city.

NATO, leading airstrikes against Qaddafi's troops, said Thursday it is trying to find a way to break the assault.

While rebels are holding out, Qaddafi's forces have made inroads. Government troops have taken control of a main thoroughfare, Tripoli Street, and set up snipers' nests on nearby rooftops, including on the city's main high-rise. Mortars, shells and gunfire have pummeled holes into homes, mosques and a hospital in the city center, and streets are lined with burned out cars and shops.

The biggest snipers' nest of several dozen gunmen operates from the roof of the city's main high-rise, known as the Insurance Building. A hospital official, who lives a half-mile from that building and gave his first name as Nasser, said his house was hit three times by mortars and that another shell demolished his car.

Tripoli Street has been particularly hard hit, with mosques, homes and a maternity hospital in the area damaged by shelling. During a recent visit to Misrata, an Associated Press reporter saw buildings with big holes torn into walls and black smoke billowing from broken windows. The street was lined with burned out shops, two torched tanks and uprooted trees.

In a video recently posted on Facebook, several bodies were shown lying on the floor of a hospital, including that of a child.

Terrified families driven out by snipers have sought refuge in seaside areas, cramming into mosques, schools and strangers' homes.

Residents report a shortage of baby formula and diapers, and say only five bakeries operate on a limited schedule, until they run out of flour. Bakeries in the city center are closed for fear of snipers.

The urban warfare in Misrata, a city of 300,000, highlights the rebels' frustration with what they say is the slow pace of NATO airstrikes, meant to keep back Qaddafi's forces. Western officials have said it is difficult to act in Misrata because the regime's troops are too close to civilians.

But on Thursday, NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said the alliance is focusing attention on Misrata. She said the alliance's governing body, the North Atlantic Council, discussed the situation in the city with non-NATO partner nations taking part in the Libyan operation.

Rebels say NATO must act decisively and that they've given the alliance a detailed list of targets for airstrikes in areas abandoned by civilians.

"For every day of delay in lifting this siege of Misrata, more people are killed and injured," said one of the fighters who would only give his first name, Abdel-Salam, for fear of retribution.

So far, 247 bodies have recovered, but the toll is likely higher because the fighting prevents bodies and wounded people from being taken to hospitals, rebel officials say. Last week, a Turkish ship evacuated dozens of wounded from the city, including men who said they had been shot and left to bleed after being dragged into the streets by Qaddafi loyalists.

Misrata, about 120 miles east of the capital Tripoli on the Mediterranean coast, rose up against Qaddafi just a few days after the first protests against his 42-year-old regime erupted across Libya in mid-February. Residents opposed to Qaddafi quickly took control of the city.

But while much of eastern Libya fell to anti-government forces, Qaddafi's grip on the western part of the country proved to be stronger. His troops crushed resistance in the other main western city held by the rebels, Zawiyah. Now Misrata is now the only major rebel stronghold in that area.

After more than a month of siege, Misrata's situation has become dire, said Valerie Amos, a top U.N. official who oversees emergency relief operations.

"We are very concerned about people trapped in Misrata, including migrant workers," Amos said earlier this week, calling for a temporary cease-fire to allow civilians to leave the area. "The situation on the ground is critical for a large number of people who immediately need food, clean water and emergency medical assistance," she said.

A cargo ship chartered by the World Food Programme (WFP), carrying food, medical supplies, doctors and other relief items, docked in Misrata Thursday.

"It is vital that we get these relief supplies to the vulnerable - especially women and children - and we are working with local partners, including the Libyan Red Crescent, to ensure their needs are met, said WFP Executive Director, Josette Sheeran.

The ship is also delivering medical supplies on behalf of UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO).

"The situation is urgent for tens of thousands of children in Misrata and across Libya, who are potential victims of the fighting or who have already paid a terrible price," said UNICEF's Executive Director Anthony Lake. "These supplies are a lifeline to them and all those trapped in the fighting."

Moussa Ibrahim, a spokesman for the Libyan government, claimed that Qaddafi's forces fire at Misrata only in self-defense. If reporters hear the sound of fighting there, he said, that means "rebels prepared and hoping for martyrdom have attacked our troops and we have returned fire," he said this week.