

Libya: Transitional Council Failing to Secure Weapons

Stockpiles of Surface-to-Air Missiles, Other Arms Found Unguarded

OCTOBER 25, 2011

For months we have been warning the NTC and NATO about the dangers posed by these vast stockpiles of unguarded weapons, and the urgent need to secure them. Surface-to-air missiles can take down civilian aircraft, and the explosive weapons can be converted easily into the car bombs and IEDs that have killed thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch

(Misrata) – Vast amounts of unsecured explosive weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, remain unguarded in the area around Sirte, Libya, Human Rights Watch said today. The National Transitional Council (NTC), Libya’s transitional government, has promised for months that it would secure weapons facilities.

Two unguarded sites near Sirte inspected by Human Rights Watch on October 22, 2011, contained surface-to-air missiles, tank and mortar rounds, large numbers of munitions, and thousands of guided and unguided aerial weapons.

“For months we have been warning the NTC and NATO about the dangers posed by these vast stockpiles of unguarded weapons, and the urgent need to secure them,” said [Peter Bouckaert](#), emergencies director at Human Rights Watch. “Surface-to-air missiles can take down civilian aircraft, and the explosive weapons can be converted easily into the car bombs and IEDs that have killed thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

The US government has a team of experts on the ground in Libya helping the NTC locate missing surface-to-air missiles. Fourteen contractors are in Libya and 50 more are being sent, Assistant Secretary of State for Political and Military Affairs Andrew Shapiro told the media on October 14. On October 18, the US pledged US \$40 million to help Libya “secure and destroy dangerous stockpiles of weapons.” Canada has pledged CA\$10 million (US \$9.97 million) for this effort.

On October 22, Human Rights Watch researchers saw a truck in Sirte carrying surface-to-air missile tubes and other munitions. A Misrata-based anti-Gaddafi fighting group said it was preparing to take the weapons from Sirte to Misrata. Human Rights Watch identified seven SA-24 surface-to-air missiles – one of Russia’s most advanced surface-to-air missiles – on the truck. The Misrata fighters did not appear to have either the triggers for hand-held launching or a vehicle-mounted launcher that they would need to fire this specific type of surface-to-air missile. The Misrata fighters took Human Rights Watch to a site on the outskirts of Sirte where they had found the surface-to-air missiles and other munitions.

At the site, Human Rights Watch found various weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, tank rounds, mortars, and powerful air-to-surface missiles. Some of the weapons were in a storage facility and others in the open up to 500 meters from the facility, apparently moved there by Gaddafi forces that feared that NATO would strike the facility. Human Rights Watch found at least 14 empty crates that had once contained a total of 28 SA-24 missiles. More than 20 SA-7 surface-to-air missiles remained in their original packaging.

While Human Rights Watch was inspecting the site, civilians and armed anti-Gaddafi fighters arrived with pickup trucks to remove more weapons. The entire area had already been heavily looted, and some weapons, such as AK-103 and FN-1 automatic rifles, had apparently been entirely removed from the site, based on the numerous empty crates there for those weapons.

At a second site more than 100 kilometers south of Sirte, Human Rights Watch located a massive, unsecured ammunition storage facility with at least 70 bunkers containing explosive weapons. The entire facility was intact and undamaged from NATO airstrikes. Inside the bunkers, Human Rights Watch found large quantities of munitions, as well as thousands of guided and unguided aerial weapons.

Thousands of crates of rocket-propelled grenades, such as RPG-7 shells for tank cannons, artillery and mortar projectiles, anti-aircraft rounds, and other munitions lay dispersed for kilometers in the open desert around the second facility, also apparently moved to prevent them from being targeted in NATO strikes. Human Rights Watch spent two hours inspecting the site, without seeing a guard or any other person. Many of the bunkers had already been heavily looted.

“Now that fighting has ended, one of the NTC’s top priorities should be securing weapons facilities, and bringing the unchecked flow of arms in the country under control,” Bouckaert said.

“The evidence at these sites indicates that there is no time to waste.”