War crimes prosecutor urges Libya strongman to hand over commander

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By AFP

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The International Criminal Court's prosecutor on Wednesday urged Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar to hand over a commander wanted for war crimes including the cold-blooded execution of 33 people.

Fatou Bensouda delivered her appeal before the UN Security Council, whose members Russia and Egypt have close ties to Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, which controls the country's eastern region.

ICC judges in August issued an arrest warrant for Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfalli, a commander of the Al-Saiqa brigade, based in Libya's second city of Benghazi.

Werfalli is accused of having ordered or personally carried out seven executions between March and July this year and in June 2016 that were filmed and posted to social media sites.

These "resulted in the murder of 33 people in cold blood," Bensouda told the council.

She appealed directly to Haftar "to demonstrate, by concrete actions, respect for international justice by ensuring Mr al-Werfalli's immediate transfer to the Libyan authorities so that he may be surrendered to the court without delay."

The ICC has issued a second arrest warrant this year against former security chief Al-Tuhamy Mohamed Khaled, accused of war crimes committed in 2011.

The indictments could complicate a new UN push for peace in Libya, led by envoy Ghassan Salame, who was appointed in June.

Salame is seeking to negotiate a new political deal that would give Haftar a role in a power-sharing government currently led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and enjoys UN backing.

In her address to the council, Bensouda stressed that "the situation remains dire in Libya", which has been in chaos since the 2011 ouster of long-time leader Moamer Kadhafi.

In late October, the bodies of 36 men were found in the town of Al-Abyar, near Benghazi, deepening concern about ongoing torture and executions.

"The bodies were reportedly handcuffed, showed signs of torture and displayed bullet wounds to the head," said Bensouda.

In a veiled warning at Haftar, the prosecutor said she was ready to request new arrest warrants if atrocities continue to be committed, saying: "These crimes must stop."

Bensouda urged the council to support her efforts to bring the perpetrators of war crimes in Libya to justice, warning that inaction would send a signal to those responsible that "they are beyond the reach of the law."

"This, we cannot allow," she said.

The Security Council in 2011 unanimously agreed to ask the ICC to investigate war crimes in Libya.