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Libya: NATO strike kills 19 civilians

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The Libyan government says 19 civilians have been killed in a NATO air strike on the home of one of Muammar Gaddafi's top officials, a day after the Western military alliance admitted killing civilians in a separate attack.

Libyan officials took reporters to Surman, 70km west of Tripoli, to the site of what they said was a NATO air strike on the home of Khouildi Hamidi.

The officials said the attack on the home of Hamidi, a member of Libya's 12-strong Revolutionary Command Council, led by Gaddafi, took place on Monday morning.

Rescue teams were looking for survivors while reporters visited the site.

Reporters were then taken to a hospital in nearby Sabrata where they were shown nine bodies, including those of two children, plus some body parts, which the officials said were all of people killed in the attack.

The state-run Jana news agency later reported on its website that eight children were among 19 people killed in the attack.

The dead included members of Hamidi's family, it said. The government said Hamidi himself was not hurt.

NATO said it had bombed a "legitimate military target, a command and control node" in the area, and it could not confirm whether civilians had been hurt.

It said NATO did not target specific individuals.

Hamidi is a longtime regime insider who took part in the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power.

He reportedly commanded a battalion that crushed rebels in the nearby western city of Zawiyah in March, and his daughter is married to one of Gaddafi's sons, Saadi.

Gaddafi officials said he was inside a still-intact building at the time of the strike.

Tripoli strike

If the Libyan government's account of civilian deaths in Surman is confirmed, the incident could further complicate operations for the NATO-led military alliance, which is starting to feel the strain of a campaign taking longer and costing more than planned.

NATO **acknowledged** on Sunday that a "weapons failure" had led to civilian casualties after a strike intended to hit a missile site erred and destroyed a house in Tripoli.

Libyan officials say NATO forces have killed more than 700 civilians, although they have presented no evidence of large numbers of civilian deaths.

They say one of Gaddafi's sons and three of his grandchildren were killed six weeks ago.

Franco Frattini, Italy's foreign minister, said on Monday that civilian deaths posed a risk to the NATO-led military alliance.

"NATO is endangering its credibility, we cannot risk killing civilians," Frattini told reporters before an EU foreign ministers' meeting in Luxembourg to discuss ways to aid the rebels fighting Gaddafi.

The Arab League, which in March asked the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians, condemned Sunday's mission by NATO.

"When the Arab League agreed on the idea of having a no-fly zone over Libya it was to protect civilians but when civilians get killed this has to be condemned with the harshest of statements," said deputy secretary-general Ahmed Ben Helli.