

Gaddafi threatens mass killings as popular rebellion spreads

By Patrick Martin
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Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi threatened widespread massacres against his own people in an appearance on state television Tuesday as the revolt against his regime consolidated its grip on the eastern half of the country and spread to the suburbs of Tripoli, the capital.

Hundreds have been killed in the weeklong revolt, which has faced the bloodiest repression of any of the popular movements that have erupted throughout North Africa and the Middle East since the overthrow of Tunisian President Ben Ali on January 14.

Al Jazeera television news service reported that oil workers have joined the anti-government struggle with a strike that has shut down the Nafuora oilfield.

In the 70-minute diatribe, which appeared to have been taped before a small audience of security agents, Gaddafi called on the people of Libya to rise up and defend his regime, while at the same time threatening to replicate the worst historic crimes in repressing those who opposed him.

He cited approvingly the US destruction of the Iraqi city of Fallujah, China's crushing of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising and the bombardment of the Russian parliament by Boris Yeltsin as examples of what he would do to rebel-held cities like Derna and Bayda. He threatened to "execute" dissidents, referring favorably to the Waco massacre in the United States as a precedent.

While calling on his supporters to "cleanse Libya house by house," Gaddafi also made an open appeal for imperialist support, claiming that Libya's second-largest city, Benghazi, was falling into the grip of Islamic fundamentalists and "will give Al Qaeda a base."

Actually there is no evidence of any significant Islamic fundamentalist role in the rebellion, which is driven by economic grievances and has split Libya along regional and tribal fault lines that Gaddafi has manipulated effectively throughout his 41-year rule.

Despite his self-proclaimed status as "a revolutionary from tents" who was prepared to die a "martyr," Gaddafi rules in the interest of a narrow bourgeois clique that has raked in fabulous profits from Libya's enormous oil resources. The

country is the seventeenth-largest oil producer and a leading supplier to Italy and other European countries.

While enjoying mass support in the first decades of his rule—including the period of intense confrontation with the Reagan administration in the mid-1980s—Gaddafi has become increasingly isolated and unpopular. Only a few hundred supporters rallied in Green Square in Tripoli in response to his televised appeal, most of them police and other security officers.

As the revolt has spread, a number of top officials have deserted the regime. The most recent is Abdel Fattah Younis, the interior minister and commander of the Thunderbolt commando brigade, a Gaddafi loyalist since the 1969 coup that overthrew the Libyan monarchy.

Younis announced Tuesday in Benghazi that he was defecting to the rebellion and urged other military forces to break with Gaddafi. Referring to the date of the first public rebellion in Benghazi, he told Al Jazeera, "I gave up all my posts in response to the February 17 Revolution and my conviction that it has just demands."

Anti-government demonstrators have seized control of about half the coastal strip where most of Libya's population lives, from the Egyptian border to the city of Sirte, more than 600 miles to the west. Armed residents of Adjabiya, west of Benghazi, were guarding nearby oil facilities and pipelines, as well as the oil port of Zuweita, according to press reports.

There was scattered fighting in cities in the western half of the country, including Tripoli, but Gaddafi's forces appeared to retain control there Tuesday. In Sabratah, 50 miles west of the capital, the Libyan army deployed troops after protesters attacked and destroyed the offices of the security services, the online Quryna newspaper reported.

Tripoli residents who spoke with Al Jazeera and Western news services reported dozens of people killed Sunday and Monday as security forces savagely attacked anti-Gaddafi demonstrators, using heavy weapons, tanks, helicopters and jet aircraft. Al Jazeera estimated the death toll in Tripoli alone at over 250.

Two Libyan Mirage F1 jet fighters landed in Malta on Monday, after their pilots—who claimed to be colonels from the Okba bin Nafe base near Tripoli—refused to obey orders to bomb protesters and defected.

At least 40 people were treated for gunshot wounds Sunday night and Monday morning at Tripoli's Central Hospital emergency room, and another 12 people died while en route to the hospital. There were so many casualties that doctors ran out of medication and had to turn away additional victims to other hospitals. Walls in the Tajoura and Fashloum neighborhoods of Tripoli were riddled with bullets, and there were dead and wounded lying in the streets.

"Groups of Land Cruisers with masked men wearing military uniforms with heavy guns just passed in front of my street heading to downtown," one resident told the *Washington Post* via Skype. "They are the regime's guards. God help us tonight. . . . Helicopters are shooting down on people on the ground in Tripoli."

According to an Associated Press report, militiamen shot any "moving human being" with live ammunition, including ambulances. A resident told AP, "Bodies are now in the streets; those injured and now bleeding can't find a hospital or an ambulance to rescue them. Nobody is allowed to get in and if anybody gets in, will be shot to death."

The *Los Angeles Times* interviewed a Tripoli businessman who said that men with automatic weapons opened fire on demonstrators early Monday after a televised speech by Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam. "There were bodies falling all over," he said, adding that four helicopters flew over the city during the day opening fire on protesters.

Another resident, who spoke with McClatchy News Service, reported seeing 70 corpses at a park near the Green Square in central Tripoli. "There is gunfire going on nonstop," he said. "It's basically a war zone."

Protesters took control of the city of Gharyan, near Tripoli, burned the police station in Meslala and marched openly in Tarhunah, where police joined with the demonstrators. Other towns around Tripoli, including Al-Zawiya, Misrata, and Khoms were in rebel control.

In the east, the Gaddafi regime's power collapsed on Sunday in the face of masses of people who took up arms, and police and soldiers who rebelled and joined the people in the streets of Benghazi and other cities. More than 250 people were killed in Benghazi alone, human rights organizations said.

Some 26 people were killed during the uprising in the city of Al Bayda, Libya's third largest, according to one resident, Marai Al Mahry, who spoke to Reuters by telephone. Protesters were attacked with tanks and airplanes, he said. "The only thing we can do now is not give up, no

surrender, no going back," he said. "We will die anyway, whether we like it or not. It is clear that they don't care whether we live or not. This is genocide."

Other eyewitnesses said that police and army troops clashed in Al Bayda, with the police siding with demonstrators and forcing the military to pull out of the city. Throughout the eastern half of the country, armed residents were patrolling the streets of towns and cities and the security forces of the Gaddafi regime have disappeared.

The defection of Interior Minister Younis was only the latest in a series of high-profile resignations, by the justice minister, Mustafa Mohamed Abud Al Jeleil, and dozens of Libyan diplomats, including the regime's representatives at the United Nations and the Arab League, and its ambassadors to the United States, China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Poland and Australia.

The principal concern of the imperialist powers is to secure their interests in Libya's oil industry and introduce their own military forces to give themselves leverage. Naval vessels and military transport jets from a half dozen European powers, including the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, are already on their way to the former Italian colony.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, visiting Cairo, expressed concern about the "imminent danger of a civil war in Libya and the exodus of migrants to Italy." The same concern was advanced by the Italian government as a pretext for sending security forces to Tunisia.

The two largest oil producers, Italy's ENI and Spain's Repsol, halted production operations and oil exports and began pulling out expatriate staff. Shell, BP and the German Wintershall, a subsidiary of BASF, did the same.

Both the Arab League and the United Nations Security Council were holding emergency meetings Tuesday to discuss options for intervening in the Libyan crisis and containing the development of a revolutionary explosion which would give new impetus to the movement already sweeping the region.

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