

Libyan government massacres demonstrators as uprising spreads

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The Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi is attempting to violently suppress an uprising centred in the country's eastern cities and towns. US-based organisation Human Rights Watch has said it has confirmed 173 deaths in the protests, which began last Thursday, but according to some reports more than 500 may have been killed by regime forces.

One of Gaddafi's sons, Saif El Islam Gaddafi, spoke live on state television at around 1 a.m. this morning—he declared “we are not Tunisia and Egypt”, warned of civil war, and menacingly threatened to “fight to the last minute, until the last bullet”.

Most of the killings have been in Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city, on the north-east coast. Reports are limited due to government censorship and strict restrictions on foreign journalists. Al Jazeera's broadcasts have been jammed, and the internet has been almost entirely shut down.

The demonstrations in Benghazi against the Gaddafi government appear to have developed into an open insurrection. Many people in the city who have been able to speak with the media have described the situation as resembling a war zone, with guerrilla fighting between government and anti-government forces.

Residents told Al Jazeera that they had constructed barricades from rubbish and debris. One military unit reportedly joined the uprising.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “There were numerous reports that protesters had seized weapons caches from abandoned government bases and had gone on the offensive against government barracks. ‘The soldiers have fled and the citizens have taken their weapons,’ one resident of Benghazi said in a telephone interview. ‘Citizens now have rocket-propelled grenades, Kalashnikovs and hand grenades. I can hear the bullets now and RPGs and people beeping their car horn in celebrations’.”

Libya is bordered to its west by Tunisia, and to its east by Egypt. Muammar Gaddafi—who in recent years has assiduously courted the approval of Washington and the European powers, also working closely with major oil corporations—is now clearly

determined to avoid the same fate as former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, using violence and state provocations to maintain his tenuous grip on power.

Many of those killed in Benghazi and elsewhere were unarmed, and reportedly included women and children. Government snipers fired on people from rooftops. Tanks and helicopter gunships were also used against demonstrators. A regional medical coordinator in Benghazi told Al Jazeera: “At least one dead man had been hit by an anti-aircraft missile, while other bodies are riddled with heavy machine gun fire.”

A doctor in a Benghazi hospital also told the television news network: “It's a massacre here. The military is shooting at all the protesters with live bullets, I've seen it happen with my own eyes. The military forces are everywhere, even from the hospital I work, we are not safe. There was an 8-year-old boy who died the other day from a gunshot to the head—what did he do to deserve this?”

The *Wall Street Journal* reported: “Residents said pro-Gadhafi loyalists driving around in cars fired rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns at anyone in the streets.”

Many of these weapons have been exported by Britain and France. On Saturday, the British government of Prime Minister David Cameron suspended eight licences for further arms exports to Libya, along with 24 licences for contracts with the Bahraini government. The *Independent* reported that since coming to office last May, the Cameron government has issued licences for British companies to provide the Gaddafi regime with “tear gas, small-arms ammunition, military vehicles and thermal-imaging equipment”.

Several sources claimed that the military shot into crowds of mourners attending funerals of those earlier killed by government forces.

Demonstrators have also alleged that many of these forces are foreign mercenaries, from Chad, Tunisia, and other African countries. Fatih, a 26-year-old unemployed Benghazi resident, told Al Jazeera that many of the foreign security forces spoke only French, not Arabic, “making them impossible to reason with”. She

added: “They don’t ask questions—they just shoot live ammunition. Innocent people are getting caught up in all this. They are being killed for simply staying at home. House-to-house searches are taking place as the security forces look for weapons.”

Fighting has been reported in the other cities and towns in the east. In Bayda, a city of around 200,000 people near the Egyptian border, residents said that local police joined anti-government forces and attacked the army’s second brigade, forcing soldiers to retreat to the city’s outskirts. In Ajdabiya, a town 160 kilometres south of Benghazi, Al Jazeera reported that protestors have declared a “Free City” after razing the headquarters of Gaddafi’s Revolutionary Committee and fourteen other government buildings.

Unrest has spread from the east to the capital, Tripoli, and other urban centres in the west. Late last night, up to 2,000 protestors defied the government clampdown and gathered in Tripoli, reportedly burning a portrait of Gaddafi and chanting anti-government slogans.

The *New York Times* reported: “Young men armed themselves with chains around their knuckles, steel pipes and machetes. The police had retreated from some neighborhoods, and protestors were seen armed with police batons, helmets and rifles commandeered from riot squads. The protestors set Dumpsters on fire, blocking roads in some neighborhoods. In the early evening the sound and smells of gunfire hung over the central city, and by midnight looting had begun.”

In the city of Zentan, southwest of Tripoli, AFP reported that several government buildings were burned down amid clashes.

Late Sunday, the leadership of the Warfala tribe, one of the largest among Libya’s population of 6.4 million, declared it was joining the movement against Gaddafi. The 500,000-strong Tuareg tribe has similarly moved against the government. According to Al Jazeera: “Protesters in Ghat and Ubary, home to Libyan Tuareg clans are reportedly attacking government buildings and police stations.”

The government’s crisis is triggering the emergence of divisions within the ruling elite. Yesterday two of Gaddafi’s diplomats declared their opposition to the regime. Libya’s ambassador to China, Hussein Sadiq al Musrati, announced his resignation while appearing on Al Jazeera’s Arabic network. He appealed for the army to intervene. Libya’s Arab League representative in Cairo, Abdel-Monem al-Houni, said he had “resigned from all his duties and joined the popular revolution”.

Inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, working people and students in Libya are driven by the same social and economic problems wracking North Africa and the Middle East. Unemployment in Libya is believed to be as high as 30 percent, and poverty is deep and widespread, despite the country’s enormous oil wealth. The precise role played by the social

grievances of the working class and urban poor in these protests is difficult to determine, however.

Within the movement, especially in the east, various tribal leaderships are most concerned with securing a greater cut of the oil royalties for themselves. The *Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday: “The country’s eastern half, of which Benghazi is the hub, has a long history of resistance to outsiders and of friction with Mr. Gadhafi’s government in Tripoli. Since taking power in a coup in 1969, Mr. Gadhafi has sidelined the region’s tribes in favor of his own Qatatfa tribe in the competition for key government posts. Though much of the country’s oil wealth is in the east, the territory sees a disproportionately low share of state investment and resources.”

Shaikh Faraj al Zuway, head of the Al-Zuwayya tribe in eastern Libya, told Al Jazeera that unless the government’s violence stopped, “We will stop oil exports to Western countries within 24 hours.”

In his televised address this morning, Seif al-Islam Gaddafi attempted to bolster the government’s position by stoking fears of civil war and separatist splits. “There is a plot against Libya,” he declared. “People want to create a government in Benghazi and others want to have an Islamic emirate in Bayda. All these [people] have their own plots... The country will be divided like North and South Korea, we will see each other through a fence. You will wait in line for months for a visa.”

Gaddafi’s remarks underscored the regime’s increasingly tenuous grip on power. The dictator’s son admitted that the army had killed citizens—he blamed soldiers for not being used to dealing with “riots”—and acknowledged that demonstrators had armed themselves. He attempted to attribute the unrest to Libyan exiles in Europe and America, who “want us to kill each other then come and rule us, like in Iraq”. However, he also offered concessions including new media laws, a revised constitution, and even a “new national anthem and new flag”. In an attempt to defuse opposition in the working class, Gaddafi pledged to raise wages.



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