

Uprising spreads to Libyan capital

Ann Talbot
22 February 2011

As the uprising in Libya spreads throughout the country, the toll of protesters killed and wounded by the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi continues to rise. Jets have opened fire on protesters, including, according to some reports, in the capital Tripoli. Fighter planes reportedly attacked demonstrators and bombed the approach roads to the city, which is home to two million people.

Speaking live over the phone to Al Jazeera, Adel Mohamed Saleh, a Tripoli resident, described what was happening:

“What we are witnessing today is unimaginable. War planes and helicopters are indiscriminately bombing one area after another. There are many, many dead.

“Our people are dying. It is the policy of scorched earth. Every 20 minutes they are bombing.

“It is continuing, it is continuing. Anyone who moves, even if they are in their car, they will hit you.”

The uprising spread to Tripoli Sunday night when 4,000 protesters gathered in Green Square calling for the overthrow of the regime. Government thugs attacked them and security forces opened fire with live ammunition. Clashes went on until dawn. Heavily armed mercenaries were said to be driving through the streets shooting on sight and running people down. On-the-spot reports speak of the mercenaries including not only Africans, but also Italians.

Gaddafi’s son, Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, went on government television late Sunday night to threaten civil war. He warned “We will fight to the last minute, to the last bullet.” He said there would be “rivers of blood” in Libya if the protests continued.

The massacre of civilians in the capital is the regime’s answer to the escalating protests. The use of the Air Force against civilians is an indication of both the ruthlessness and the desperation of Gaddafi. The ruling clique around him has launched a civil war against the Libyan masses.

At least two pilots refused orders to fire on civilians and flew their planes to Malta, where they asked for asylum. In Stockholm, China, India and other countries, as well as at the United Nations, Libyan ambassadors resigned following the assault in Tripoli.

It is not just the Gaddafi regime that is to blame for these crimes. European foreign ministers meeting in Brussels formally condemned the use of heavy weapons against civilians. But speaking at a press conference after the meeting, the European Union high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton, called on “all parties to show restraint,” as though there was a balance of forces between a modern military machine and a civilian population.

Her words express the level of collusion that exists between the

European Union (EU) and the Gaddafi regime. All EU states have been eager to develop close relations with Libya since international sanctions were lifted in 2004, with Britain under Tony Blair and the former colonial power Italy, under Silvio Berlusconi, leading the way.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague spoke on the phone to Seif al-Islam Gaddafi shortly before he made his threats to the Libyan population. Britain has cancelled eight export licences for arms to Libya since the uprising began. But a vast amount of British-made equipment has already been shipped to Libya and has been used in the crackdown on protests.

The military hardware exported to Libya from Britain last year included tear gas, crowd control ammunition, surveillance equipment, small arms, sniper rifles and sights, command and control vehicles, and radio jamming equipment. Britain is also involved in training the Libyan police force, which has distinguished itself by its brutality.

For Britain and the other EU states the uprising in Libya is a disaster. The UK government has cultivated links with Gaddafi as part of their efforts to win oil contracts for British firms such as BP. Some 79 percent of Libya’s oil goes to the EU, making Europe Libya’s biggest customer.

Libya has just overtaken Saudi Arabia as the third largest supplier of oil to Europe behind Norway and Russia. Italy imports 32 percent of Libya’s oil, Germany 14 percent and France 10 percent. Some 23 percent goes to the rest of Europe.

Some demonstrators have alleged direct collusion by the Italian government with the repression. Berlusconi over the weekend said of Gaddafi, “No, I haven’t been in contact with him. The situation is still in flux and so I will not allow myself to disturb anyone.” It was yesterday before he issued a pro-forma condemnation of violence.

Only days ago the Italian oil company ENI assured investors that it was “business as usual” in Libya. On Monday it began evacuating its staff. Norway’s Statoil, which operates in a consortium with France’s Total and Spain’s Repsol, announced that it would close down its Tripoli offices. OMV of Austria is evacuating all but essential staff.

BP has suspended its plan to begin exploratory drilling in the massive Sirte oilfield. The drilling was due to begin within weeks. Sirte is considered dangerously close to Benghazi, which is now in the hands of anti-regime protesters.

Nor is the relationship between European governments and Libya confined to oil. Libya has extensive investments in Europe, especially Italy. In addition, Gaddafi has amassed foreign exchange reserves estimated at over \$70 billion, which he uses to

exercise influence. When his youngest son, Hannibal Gaddafi, was arrested in Switzerland for maltreating his domestic staff, Gaddafi cut off oil supplies and threatened a run on the Swiss banking system. He received an immediate apology from the authorities.

The popular uprising in Libya threatens to bring down a tyrant long courted by European governments and seen as a reliable partner who would ensure Europe's oil supplies and invest the riches that his family had looted from the Libyan people in European banks, companies and universities.

In Brussels, Baroness Ashton insisted that North Africa is within the EU's sphere of interest.

"This is our neighbourhood," she declared, adding, "Europe should be judged by its ability to act in its own neighborhood."

Ashton is due to visit Egypt next week, hard on the heels of UK Prime Minister David Cameron. European leaders are desperate to see friendly regimes established in North Africa that will ensure continuity with the ousted dictatorships.

Cameron presented himself as champion of democracy. The British government's record of arm sales to the most repressive regimes in the region tells a different story. "Our two countries go back over decades, over centuries," Cameron said of Egypt as he promised a package of aid to the new military government.

Britain was one of the main colonial powers in the region from 1882, when Britain and France sent warships to bombard Alexandria. France has exercised colonial authority over Tunisia and parts of Morocco. The Algerian masses fought a determined war to assert their independence from France from 1954 to 1962. Spain continues to occupy part of Morocco.

The European states are eager to steal a march on Washington by professing their enthusiasm for democracy and shaping compliant governments. In contrast to its rhetoric, the EU is effectively colluding in the Gaddafi regime's massacre of civilians.

At the weekend the *Financial Times* showed a cartoon in which Berlusconi is depicted being crushed by a line of falling dominoes labelled Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Libya. Even as European foreign ministers gathered in Brussels, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini gave vent to his alarm. "Would you imagine having an Islamic Arab Emirate at the borders of Europe? This would be a very serious threat," he said.

In fact, Islamists have played only a small part in the Libyan uprising, as elsewhere in North Africa. From its beginning in Tunisia and in Egypt, the revolutionary movement has been predominantly secular in character, reflecting the grievances of unemployed young people, workers and the poor who are unable to afford rising prices.

What Frattini fears is a genuinely popular government. European governments have no difficulty working with Islamic regimes such as that in Saudi Arabia. What they want is a regime that is capable of suppressing its own people. Gaddafi offered them precisely that and now his sons are attempting to demonstrate that they can do the same, even if it means slaughtering men, women and children with jet fighters.

The Libyan masses are undeterred by Gaddafi's threats. Calls are circulating for a million man march to Green Square in Tripoli. On Monday morning, the People's Hall and other government buildings in Tripoli were reported to be ablaze. The state television

station al-Jamahiriyah 2 TV and al-Shababia radio were sacked and at least one police station was set on fire. On Monday night two television stations were reported to be occupied.

The eruption of protests in Tripoli follows a week of demonstrations and clashes in eastern Libya centred in Benghazi, Libya's second city. In Benghazi, Monday brought celebrations on the streets after more overnight fighting in which 60 people were reported killed. Protesters are now reported to have taken control of the city.

The city of al-Zawiya is said to be under the control of anti-regime forces after police fled from protesters. Fighting is reported at the Ras Lanuf oil refinery and petrochemical complex on the Gulf of Sirte in the east of the country. Workers in the oil industry are reported to have gone on strike.

The entrance of the working class into the situation marks a significant turning point in the uprising, as it did earlier in Egypt.

Hundreds of people have protested in front of the Libyan embassy in Cairo and in Egypt's northern port city of Alexandria, waving banners saying "down with the killer, down with Gaddafi," and "Gaddafi has hired African mercenaries to kill Libyans."

Aid convoys have been sent across the Egypt-Libya border. Ten Egyptians were shot to death in Tobruk, according to Egyptian doctor Seif Abdel Latif.

The working class of North Africa and the Middle East is the only force that can unite the oppressed masses and take the revolutionary movement through to completion, ousting the dictatorial regimes and expelling the international oil companies, banks and corporations that see North Africa as a source of immense profit. Their greatest support will come from other workers around the world, especially in Europe and America.

Already, protesting workers in Wisconsin have drawn parallels between their experiences and those of the North African and Middle Eastern masses. Millions more will do the same. The revolutionary upsurge that began in Tunisia only a few weeks ago marked the beginning of a new revolutionary epoch and no corner of the world will be left untouched by it.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact