

Fighting continues in Tripoli after Gaddafi compound is overrun

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Fighting continued in the Libyan capital of Tripoli Tuesday after NATO-backed forces sacked Muammar Gaddafi's heavily bombed Bab al-Aziziya compound.

While leaders of the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC), echoed by the media, proclaimed the fall of the compound as a symbol of final victory, heavy fighting continued in a number of areas of Tripoli, a city of two million.

The compound appeared to be only lightly defended by loyalist troops who melted away once it came under attack. Over the whole previous five months, it had been subjected to heavy bombardment by NATO warplanes including in raids patently aimed at assassinating Gaddafi. These attacks were intensified in the past week.

The armed NATO-backed forces who stormed into the compound were accompanied by large numbers of Tripoli residents who joined in looting its buildings, taking guns and ammunition as well as television sets and other goods.

There was no indication that Gaddafi or any members of his family or senior officials were in the compound when it fell. The whereabouts of Gaddafi, who has ruled Libya since the 1969 young officers' coup that toppled a US-backed monarch and brought him to power, are unknown.

Two days after the NATO-backed forces rode into the capital, prompting declarations that Gaddafi's regime had fallen, fierce clashes are continuing in the al-Mansoura district and other areas of the capital.

The Tripoli international airport, which the "rebels" had also claimed to control, was seen on Tuesday to be the scene of heavy fighting.

The *Wall Street Journal* warned that the city was dangerously divided along tribal and social lines between areas opposed to Gaddafi and those that still support him. "These divisions have erupted in increasingly bloody street fighting that threaten a vacuum of power and a Balkanized breakup of this city of two million people."

As the *New York Times* reported after the fall of Bab al-Aziziya, "Despite rebel claims of a new triumph, it was not

clear whether they had complete control of the compound—or for that matter, whether the rebel gains in Tripoli were the beginnings of a decisive victory in the conflict—or the start of potentially prolonged street fighting for control of the capital. Overstated claims of advances by the rebels—including the arrests of two Qaddafi sons that later proved false—have not helped their credibility."

The credibility of the NTC suffered a major blow early Tuesday, when Gaddafi's son and heir apparent, Saif al-Islam, made an appearance at the Rixos Hotel, where foreign journalists are being held by pro-Gaddafi forces. While on Monday the Benghazi-based council had reported him arrested—and the International Criminal Court at The Hague said it was preparing to receive him for trial—he was clearly free and in the company of gunmen loyal to the regime.

Saif al-Islam took a group of journalists with him on a drive through nearby neighborhoods where hundreds of people were assembled to receive weapons from government supporters.

The episode was not merely a public relations debacle for the so-called rebels. It immediately underscored deep-going tensions within the NTC and between it and other factions currently fighting for control of Tripoli.

Various explanations were given for the reversal of what had been hailed earlier in the day as a major coup for the NATO-backed forces seeking Gaddafi's overthrow. Some suspected that the capture of the Gaddafi son was a propaganda fabrication, while others said that he had either escaped or bribed his captors to free him. Another explanation circulating, however, was that pro-Gaddafi gunmen pretending to be "rebels" had taken him in custody and then released him.

The *Washington Post* quoted Emhemmed Ghula, commander of what it described as "a key Tripoli brigade" as saying, "Those people are in Benghazi. But they are not in charge of the situation here in Tripoli."

The episode must also have proven unsettling for officials in the White House and Pentagon, recalling the public appearance of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad during the US

invasion, before he and other Baathist leaders went underground and helped foment an insurgency that continues until today.

Another Gaddafi son, Muhammad, was also reported captured and then said to have escaped from house arrest on Monday.

Aside from Tripoli, other parts of Libya still remain contested. This is particularly the case with Gaddafi's hometown of Sirte, which has been considered a stronghold of regime loyalists. Units of the security forces have reportedly retreated to the town, which is located on the Mediterranean coast, dividing Benghazi from the capital of Tripoli.

Members of the NTC said that they planned to arrive in Tripoli on Wednesday to begin efforts to cobble together an interim government.

The attitude of the major imperialist powers to the events in Tripoli stood in sharp contrast to the divisions and wavering within the NTC, a collection of former Gaddafi officials, Libyan CIA "assets" and Islamists. US, British and French officials made it clear that they are making extensive preparations to carry through their goal of "regime change", which they have pursued for the last six months under the cover of United Nations resolution authorizing military force for the protection of civilians.

A spokesman for the Pentagon Tuesday failed to endorse claims by the NATO-backed "rebels" that they controlled 90 percent of the Libyan capital. "Libya and Tripoli are still very dangerous places," said Marine Col. David Lapan. "It's a very fluid situation that's changing moment by moment."

Asked if the forces loyal to Gaddafi were on the brink of defeat, Lapan declined to "get into those kind of predictions" and cautioned that while they are "certainly diminished...they remain dangerous."

The rapid advance of the "rebels" into the Libyan capital was prepared, as reports in the media Monday revealed, by heavy airstrikes guided with advanced US satellite intelligence. British, French and Qatari special forces troops and private military contractors operating on the ground directed "rebel" actions with the aim of driving pro-Gaddafi forces onto highways leading toward Tripoli so that they could be slaughtered with aerial bombardment.

There has been no accounting for the number of Libyan soldiers killed, many of them young conscripts, and the Western media has shown no inclination to cover that grisly side of the story.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon Tuesday began floating a story, immediately trumpeted by CNN and other media, that could lay the basis for a US ground intervention in Libya. The Pentagon spokesman said that the US military was closely

monitoring Libya's stock of chemical weapons, including what are supposedly 10 tons of mustard gas. There have been media reports of weapons being smuggled out of Libya, some of them bound for Gaza. Just as "weapons of mass destruction" were utilized as a pretext for invading Iraq, the necessity for securing alleged chemical weapons could serve a similar purpose in Libya.

In France, the Elysee Palace issued a statement reporting on a telephone discussion between Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and President Barack Obama Tuesday in which the two heads of state agreed that NATO military action in Libya would continue.

"They agreed to pursue their military effort in support of the Libyan authorities for as long as Gaddafi and his clan have not put down their arms," the statement said.

Amnesty International issued a statement Tuesday warning that the siege of Tripoli was creating conditions for a humanitarian disaster. "The risk to civilians increases with each day of violence in Tripoli, not just for people caught up in the fighting but also because conditions could become dire if residential areas are affected by the clashes, with food supplies, water and electricity all likely to be hit," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

The organization issued a particular warning about the fate of large numbers of migrant workers seeking to escape the capital. It noted that many of them were from sub-Saharan Africa and are "very vulnerable" as "rebels" in other areas have attacked and lynched black African migrants.

The events in Libya helped spark a stock market rally in New York on Tuesday, led by the stocks of energy corporations. There is growing speculation that the big oil conglomerates could, as a result of the US-NATO intervention, get back into Libya, which boasts the largest oil reserves in Africa, under more profitable conditions than ever.

"There are big questions as to who's going to manage the sector and how revenues will be shared," Ben Cahill, a North African analyst at the PFC Energy Consultancy firm told the *Wall Street Journal*. According to the *Journal*, Libya's national oil company must be "fundamentally reformed" to meet the demands of the Western oil interests.



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