

Libyan opposition lays siege to pro-Gaddafi strongholds

Peter Symonds
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Thousands of heavily armed opposition fighters have laid siege to the remaining strongholds of the former Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi that continue to be pounded from the air by NATO warplanes and are running short of water, food and medicine. The NATO-backed National Transitional Council (NTC) has set next Saturday as the deadline for surrender, but its militias may well attack earlier.

Pro-Gaddafi forces continue to control Gaddafi's home town of Sirte, Bani Walid and the regions of Jufra and Sebha. Attention is currently focused on Bani Walid, a desert town of 60,000 about 150 kilometres south-east of Tripoli. Negotiations for its surrender have broken down and opposition militia have cut off the town.

Over the weekend, NATO carried out more than 200 sorties over Libya, bombing 100 targets including near Bani Walid, Sirte, Hun, Buwayrat, Sebha and Waddan. Despite NATO air support and estimates that pro-Gaddafi fighters number fewer than 100, the NTC is using the siege to force tribal elders to negotiate a surrender.

The group's chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil declared that the towns were being given time to surrender in order to avoid bloodshed, but he also pointed to other considerations. Bani Walid is a stronghold of the Warfalla tribe which accounts for about one sixth of Libya's population. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, Jalil said the new regime "was mindful that military confrontation there could spawn tribal warfare."

The comment underlines the fragile character of

NATO's new puppet regime in Libya and its tenuous grip on power. The NTC has delayed moving to the capital Tripoli from its eastern stronghold of Benghazi. Speaking to reporters over the weekend, Jalil referred to the continuing danger posed by Gaddafi loyalists and the new regime's lack of control over the whole country.

The NTC, however, comprises a shaky alliance of ex-Gaddafi ministers, CIA assets and Islamist militants whose political influence beyond Benghazi in questionable. It is seeking to consolidate control of Tripoli by resurrecting Gaddafi's state apparatus, appealing to police to return to duty and offering to keep officials in top positions. It has announced plans integrate 3,000 militia fighters into the police and to find civilian jobs for others.

The *Financial Times* reported yesterday: "The provisional government has been imploring state employees, from policemen to teachers, to return to work, saying those who worked under the regime and have no blood on their hands are welcome." The offer is not limited to the lower levels, but as the newspaper pointed out, includes the former chief executive and general manager of the Libyan Investment Authority—a \$65 billion sovereign wealth fund set up by Saif al-Islam, one of Gaddafi's sons.

Media reports from Tripoli paint a chaotic picture. CNN reported on Sunday: "Guns trumpet government on the streets of the capital. Tripoli has become a city of checkpoints, weapons and no real authority as the threat of Gaddafi loyalists lingers... Those who want to carry weapons now must be issued with identification cards, but the selection process is not

centralised—neighbourhood councils are making that decision. A group called the Tripoli Revolutionary Council is trying to exert control over the city, creating the potential for further conflict with the established National Transitional Council in a volatile situation.”

In this environment, the NTC and NATO are relying heavily on Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a former leader of the Islamist and Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). He was recently chosen as commander of the Tripoli Military Council and is using his influence to try to control and disarm the city’s disparate militias. Dismissing his Islamist background, a British official told the *Financial Times*: “The immediate worry is not that a figure like Belhaj will suddenly dominate. It is more that the anti-Gaddafi coalition will fracture so that each of these smaller units tries to get its own way by force.”

Opposition groups in the city of Misrata have been critical of the domination of the NTC by those in Benghazi and have operated largely independently of its control. Protests erupted in Misrata last week after NTC Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril appointed former army general Albarrani Shkal in charge of security in Tripoli. Shkal, who defected to the opposition in May, had been operations officer for the 32nd brigade, notorious for its ruthless tactics in suppressing anti-Gaddafi activities. Other anti-Gaddafi militias from the western mountains, who played a central role in seizing Tripoli, also have their regional loyalties.

Within Benghazi itself, divisions within the “rebels” were graphically exposed by the still unexplained murder on July 28 of Abdel Fattah Younis, the NTC’s former military chief. The NTC is under pressure from Younis’s family members and the powerful Obeidi tribe to bring his killers to justice. Younis was regarded with deep suspicion by Islamists who had been imprisoned and tortured when he was Gaddafi’s interior minister.

In comments reported by Reuters yesterday, Islamist cleric Ismail al-Salabi bluntly called on the NTC’s executive committee, which functions as a de facto cabinet, to resign. “The role of the executive committee is no longer required because they are remnants of the

old regime. They should all resign, starting from the head of the pyramid all the way down,” he declared.

Salabi, who leads the February 17 Martyrs’ Brigade, is part of a network of Islamists, which include his brother Sheik al-Salabi, based in Doha, various other imams, and Libyan members of the Muslim Brotherhood. He claimed, “There are secularists who have their own private agenda and would like to portray us as extremist to alienate us from the international community and cause the division that will only serve the tyrant... Sometimes you wonder and ask, who are they serving?”

Salabi went on to warn the US and European allies against unfreezing Libyan assets too rapidly and giving them to the new regime: “Lately the executive committee has done nothing but talk about unfreezing assets. These were in the names of individuals in the old regime, so if you unfreeze the assets you unfreeze them in their favour. They belong to the Libyan people.” Last week the major powers agreed at a conference in Paris to unfreeze \$15 billion of the estimated \$170 billion in total Libyan foreign assets.

Despite efforts by the US and its European allies to portray the fall of Gaddafi as opening up a new era of democracy in Libya, the new regime will be just as repressive as the one it replaces. Its forces have already been responsible for the extra-judicial killing of pro-Gaddafi loyalists and will not hesitate to use similar methods to suppress opposition and protests to the NATO-backed administration being set up in Tripoli.



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