

Gaddafi forces abandon parts of Tripoli

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By Maria Golovnina and Ahmed Jadallah

TRIPOLI (Reuters) - Poor neighbourhoods of the Libyan capital Tripoli openly defied Muammar Gaddafi on Saturday as his grip on power after 41 years of rule looked increasingly tenuous in the face of nationwide revolt.

Security forces had abandoned the working-class Tajoura district after five days of anti-government demonstrations, residents told foreign correspondents who visited the area.

The residents said troops opened fire on demonstrators who tried to march from Tajoura to central Green Square overnight, killing at least five people. The number could not be independently confirmed.

A funeral on Saturday morning for one of the victims turned into another show of defiance against Gaddafi.

"Everyone in Tajoura came out against the government. We saw them killing our people here and everywhere in Libya," a man who identified himself as Ali, aged 25, told Reuters.

"We will demonstrate again and again, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow until they change."

The scene in Tajoura contradicted statements by Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who told reporters on Friday night that peace was returning to Libya.

Much of the east of the oil-producing country, including the second city Benghazi, is in opposition forces' hands.

Gaddafi's strongest European ally, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, said in Rome on Saturday that he no longer appeared to be in control of Libya.

Foreign powers met to discuss punitive actions against Gaddafi and expressed outrage at the tactics used to try to crush the revolt, the bloodiest of a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Arab world which has already swept away the longtime rulers of Tunisia and Egypt.

In Washington, U.S. President Barack Obama signed an order prohibiting transactions related to Libya.

"By any measure, Muammar Gaddafi's government has violated international norms and common decency and must be held accountable," Obama said in a statement on Friday.

Diplomats at the United Nations said a vote on a draft resolution calling for an arms embargo on Libya as well as travel bans and asset freezes on its leaders might come on Saturday after U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon said it could not wait.

PALM TREE BARRICADES

In Tajoura, protesters had erected barricades of rocks and palm trees across rubbish-strewn streets, and graffiti covered many walls.

Pro-Gaddafi security forces were nowhere to be seen on Saturday morning but bullet holes in the walls of the tightly packed houses bore testimony to the violence of recent days.

Several thousand people attended the funeral of one of the dead from Friday night's shooting, which quickly turned into another demonstration.

"Gaddafi is the enemy of God," the crowd chanted.

One man named Ismail, who said he was unemployed, told Reuters: "Gaddafi forces came here, they shot everywhere during a demonstration that was peaceful."

Another man said he had seen 20 dead bodies in past two days.

Gaddafi's camp took an optimistic view of the situation confronting the man who took over Libya as a young colonel in a 1969 military coup.

"Peace is coming back to our country," Saif al-Islam Gaddafi told reporters flown into Libya under close government supervision.

"If you hear fireworks don't mistake it for shooting," said the 38-year-old London-educated younger Gaddafi, smiling.

He acknowledged pro-Gaddafi forces had "a problem" with Misrata, Libya's third city, and Zawiyah, also in the west, where protesters had beaten back counter-attacks by the military, but he said the army was prepared to negotiate.

"Hopefully there will be no more bloodshed. By tomorrow we will solve this," he said.

A government-escorted trip to Zawiyah for the foreign media planned for Saturday morning was called off.

Gaddafi himself vowed to "crush any enemy" on Friday before a crowd of supporters in Green Square and threatened to open military arsenals to his supporters and tribesmen.

State television said the government was raising wages and food subsidies and ordering special allowances for all families, a late bid to enrol the support of Libya's 6 million citizens.

In recent days, the flamboyant Gaddafi has made several appearances railing against his enemies as rats and cockroaches and blaming the unrest on a range of foes from the United States and Israel to al Qaeda militants and youths high on drugs.

The revolt came as a surprise to the West, which once reviled Gaddafi as pariah due to his support for revolutionary movements and incidents such as the 1988 Lockerbie airliner bombing but later sought a rapprochement driven by oil deals and other commercial opportunities.

CORPSES EVERYWHERE

Diplomats say some 2,000 or more people have been killed across the country.

Protesters in Zawiyah, an oil refining town on the main coastal highway 50 km (30 miles) west of Tripoli, fought off government forces on several nights, according to witnesses who fled across the Tunisian border at Ras Jdir.

"There are corpses everywhere. It's a war in the true sense of the word," said Akila Jmaa, who crossed into Tunisia on Friday after travelling from the town.

In the east, ad hoc committees of lawyers, doctors, tribal elders and soldiers appeared to be filling the vacuum left by Gaddafi's government with some success.

At Tripoli's international airport, thousands of desperate foreign workers besieged the main gate trying to leave the country as police used batons and whips to keep them out.

Washington, having evacuated Americans from Libya after days of difficulties, said it was closing down its embassy.

Prosecutor-general Abdul-Rahman al-Abbar became the latest senior Libyan official to resign, telling al Arabiya television he was joining the opposition. Libya's delegations to the Arab League and the United Nations in Geneva also switched sides.

Libya supplies 2 percent of the world's oil, the bulk of it from wells and supply terminals in the east. The opposition says it controls nearly all oilfields east of Ras Lanuf.

Industry sources told Reuters that crude oil shipments from Libya, the world's 12th-largest exporter, had all but stopped because of reduced production, a lack of staff at ports and security concerns.