

# Libyan Muslim leaders tell security: stop "massacre"



Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi attends a ceremony marking the birth of Islam's Prophet Mohammed in Tripoli February 13, 2011. Palestinian refugees should capitalise on the wave of popular revolts in the Middle East by massing peacefully on the borders of Israel until it gives in to their demands, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi said on Sunday.

Credit: Reuters/Ismail Zitouny (LIBYA - Tags: POLITICS RELIGION)

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**(Reuters) -Libyan Muslim leaders told security forces to stop killing civilians, responding to a spiraling death toll from unrest which threatens veteran leader Muammar Gaddafi's authority.**

Libyan forces have shot dead dozens of anti-government protesters in the eastern city of Benghazi in the latest violence, according to an Al Jazeera television report.

The broadcast came after Human Rights Watch said 84 people had already been killed over three days in a fierce security crackdown mounted in response to protests that seek to emulate uprisings in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia.

Britain's Independent on Sunday said the body count in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, may be as high as 200.

"Dozens were killed ... We are in the midst of a massacre here," a witness told Al Jazeera television. The man said he helped take victims to hospital in Benghazi.

Benghazi and the surrounding area have been the focus of the unrest, but posts on social network sites referred to minor clashes in the capital Tripoli and of overnight gunfire in Nalut, to the west.

Al Jazeera on Sunday reported some security personnel captured by protesters appeared to be foreign mercenaries. Earlier, the channel said security forces fired at mourners at a funeral killing at least 15 people.

The bloody crackdown prompted about 50 Libyan Muslim religious leaders to issue an appeal, sent to Reuters, for the security forces, as Muslims, to stop the killing.

"This is an urgent appeal from religious scholars (faqih and Sufi sheikhs), intellectuals, and clan elders from Tripoli, Bani Walid, Zintan, Jadu, Msalata, Misrata, Zawiah, and other towns and villages of the western area," said the appeal.

"We appeal to every Muslim, within the regime or assisting it in any way, to recognize that the killing of innocent human beings is forbidden by our Creator and by His beloved Prophet of Compassion (peace be upon him)... Do NOT kill your brothers and sisters. STOP the massacre NOW!"

Libya watchers say an Egypt-style nationwide revolt is unlikely because Gaddafi, in power for four decades, has oil cash to smooth over social problems, and is still respected in much of the country.

Witness accounts have been hard to independently verify because Libyan authorities have not allowed foreign journalists into the country since the protests against Gaddafi erupted and local reporters have been barred from traveling to Benghazi.

Mobile phone connections have been frequently out of service and Internet service in Libya has been cut off, according to a U.S. company that monitors web traffic.

A Benghazi hospital doctor said victims had suffered severe wounds from high-velocity rifles. Comments on social network sites suggested one man was hit by an anti-aircraft missile and a city resident told the BBC that mortars were being used.

"Gaddafi will find it hard to make concessions in order to survive. I think the attitude of the Libyan regime is that it's all or nothing," Sir Richard Dalton, a former British ambassador to Libya, told the Independent on Sunday newspaper.

## **BENGHAZI "OUT OF CONTROL"**

A Benghazi resident said security forces were confined to a compound from which snipers were firing at protesters.

"Right now, the only military presence in Benghazi is confined to the Command Center Complex in the city. The rest of the city is liberated," he said.

"Thousands and thousands of people have gathered in front of Benghazi's court house....All of the revolutionary committee (local government) offices and police stations in the city have been burned," he said.

The account could not be independently verified and a security source earlier gave a different version, saying the situation in the Benghazi region was "80 percent under control".

The private Quryna newspaper, which is based in Benghazi and has been linked to one of Gaddafi's sons, said 24 people were killed in Benghazi on Friday. It said security forces fired to stop protesters attacking the police headquarters and a military base where weapons were stored.

"The guards were forced to use bullets," the paper said.

Italy's Ansa news agency quoted an Italian witness in Benghazi as saying the city was "completely out of control".

"All the government and institutional buildings and a bank have been burned, and the rebels have ransacked and destroyed everything. There's no one on the streets, not even the police," said the witness, who declined to be identified.

The government has not released any casualty figures or made any official comment on the violence.

The violence has been largely concentrated around Benghazi, some 1,000 km (625 miles) east of the capital, where support for Gaddafi has traditionally been weaker than elsewhere.

In Green Square in the center of Tripoli, next to the walled old city, several hundred people gathered on Saturday, waving portraits of Gaddafi and chanting "Our revolutionary leader!" and "We follow your path", a Reuters reporter said.

A state-controlled newspaper said the violence was part of "the dirty plans and the conspiracies designed by America and Zionism and the traitors of the West".