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Obama seeks consensus on Libya violence



A French doctor in Benghazi told the BBC that as many as 2,000 people might have died there

US President Barack Obama has called the leaders of the UK, France and Italy as international efforts to respond to the crisis in Libya gather pace.

Mr Obama outlined a range of possible measures, including plans for humanitarian assistance.

Earlier, the White House said all options were on the table, including sanctions. It said the military would present its own proposals to Mr Obama.

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi meanwhile blamed the uprising on al-Qaeda.

Speaking on state television, he repeated claims that hallucinogenic drugs had been given to young people to incite them to revolt.

Opposition supporters in Tripoli have said they are planning to protest in Green Square after Friday prayers at noon (1000 GMT).

On Thursday, fierce fighting was reported in nearby towns, as pro-Gaddafi forces tried to regain control of areas seized by the opposition.

A witness in Zawiya, 50km (30 miles) to the west, said an army unit had attacked protesters with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

“The Libyan revolt has put the UN under the spotlight... because European nations on the Security Council are under public pressure to be seen as doing something” Barbara Plett UN headquarters, New York

Ships and military aircraft have been sent to evacuate thousands of foreign nationals trying to flee the turmoil.

'Ruling out nothing'

On Thursday, Mr Obama telephoned French President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to co-ordinate a response to the Libya crisis.

"The president expressed his deep concern with the Libyan government's use of violence which violates international norms and every standard of human decency," said a statement.

"The leaders discussed the range of options... to hold the Libyan government accountable for its actions, as well as planning for humanitarian assistance."

US officials said the steps could include seeking stronger action by the UN Security Council - including possible sanctions such as travel bans and asset freezes - support for calls to suspend Libya from the UN Human Rights Council, and enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya.

When asked earlier whether the US was considering military action, White House spokesman Jay Carney said he could not rule out "bilateral options".

The UN Security Council is expected to meet later on Friday in New York to consider further action against Col Gaddafi's government.

The UK's permanent representative, Mark Lyall Grant, had told the Council's 15 member states at a closed session on Thursday that Col Gaddafi had failed to heed Tuesday's demand to stop the violence against peaceful demonstrators.

But it remains to be seen what steps Russia and China, who are traditionally reluctant to impose sanctions, will support.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is due to travel to Geneva on Monday for a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council focusing on Libya.

The Swiss government has ordered an immediate freeze on assets belonging to Col Gaddafi and his associates.

'Propaganda'

On Thursday, Col Gaddafi told Libyan state television that Osama Bin Laden and his followers were responsible for the violence that was sweeping the country.

"Bin Laden... this is the enemy who is manipulating people. Do not be swayed by Bin Laden," he said in a telephone interview.

He said the young protesters were "trigger happy and they shoot especially when they are stoned with drugs".

"They put hallucinatory pills in their drinks, their milk, their coffee, their Nescafe."

Col Gaddafi also repeatedly referred to the western town of Zawiya, where fierce fighting has been reported, calling the situation there a "farce".

A witness said an army unit had attacked protesters there at a mosque with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, while a doctor said he had seen at least 10 dead as well as dozens of wounded.

State television announced that the air force had destroyed what was left of weapons depots in desert and rural areas outside government control.

There has also been a fierce battle for control of an airport near the opposition-controlled city of Misrata, about 200km (120 miles) from Tripoli. A doctor told the BBC that 13 bodies and 70 casualties had been brought to his hospital.

He said the people of Misrata could not afford to allow the government troops back in.

"If we said no more, no more fighting, who can stop this? Gaddafi will not stop this. If he occupies Misrata again he will kill everybody here."

Reports from the capital say that the bodies of people killed there have been cleared off the streets. Witnesses said pro-Gaddafi militiamen - including foreign mercenaries - were patrolling the Tripoli's main streets, firing in the air.

Security had also been stepped up outside key government buildings, and homes and hospitals had been raided in search of opposition supporters, they added.

"Now is the time of secret terror and secret arrests," one resident told the Associated Press. "They are going to go home-to-home and liquidate opponents that way."

At the scene



Jon Leyne BBC News, Benghazi

Until a few days ago, Benghazi was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in Libya. Now it's safely in opposition control and the port has become an evacuation route for thousands of foreign nationals.

Local people told me how protesters took on Col Gaddafi's best fighters who were in a huge base in the centre of the city. The government troops shot at them using heavy weaponry, including anti-aircraft guns and mortars. Around 300 protesters were killed.

But gradually they armed themselves with makeshift weapons. They stole construction vehicles, loaded them with petrol then loaded them to blast holes in the walls of the military compound.

The city is now run by a committee of judges and lawyers. There are signs everywhere urging people to go back to work. Some people from the city have armed themselves with looted weapons. They are now pushing forward to oust Col Gaddafi's forces from their remaining strongholds in the west.