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200 Reported Slain as Libyan Forces Ratchet Up Violence in East

By Jason Ditz

February 19, 2011

Eastern Libya is all but lost to the Gadhafi regime at this point, but that hasn't stopped them from ratcheting up their violence in the region, particularly with massacres of mourners at funerals today. [The death toll is now reported to be upwards of 200, with over 1,000 wounded in Benghazi alone.](#)



Reports [confirm the use of sniper rifles against the unarmed mourners](#), and unconfirmed reports have the government also using mortar fire against the protesters, who have taken virtual control of the eastern half of the country, including the major eastern cities of al-Bayda and Benghazi.

Gadhafi has responded with intense violence as well as the organization of pro-regime rallies in the capital city of Tripoli, which appears to be the last place the regime has genuine control over with reports of protests cropping up everywhere else.

The [Libyan government also announced the arrests of a large number of “Arab nationals” who they blame for fomenting the rising unrest](#). The detained included Egyptians, Tunisians, Palestinians, Syrians, and others. Officials also implied that they thought Israel might be somehow involved, which is always an easy allegation to bandy about for such regimes.

Meanwhile, most of the international community is expressing “concern” about the massacres, which is the default position for Western nations uncomfortable with endorsing democracy in nations that had reliable tyrants. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, pressed on the matter because of his close ties with Gadhafi, said the “situation is not clear,” and that he didn’t want to “bother” Gadhafi by calling him to inquire about the massacres.

But arrests or no, the real story behind this unrest, as with everywhere else in the region, is economic turmoil and a populace that has grown weary of the “dictator-for-life” regimes. Libya’s situation started no differently, and even if the violence has been more intense than in most places, the protesters appear every bit as determined to see it through to the eventual ouster of the regime.