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Al Jazeera

Libya's Gaddafi clings to Tripoli

With much of the oil-producing regions in opposition hands, Gaddafi's power base shrinks to the capital's periphery

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As more cities fall into the hands of the pro-democracy protesters, Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader, is hanging on to the capital where security forces loyal to him seem to have a firm hold, even amid reports of sporadic gunfire.

On Sunday, protesters had reportedly taken over the towns of Misurata and Zawiyah, further shrinking the control of Gaddafi's government.

However, tanks were surrounding Zawiyah, 50km from Tripoli, and locals feared an imminent crackdown by pro-Gaddafi forces.

Ezeldina, a Zawiyah resident, said people in the city had raided some military camps and were prepared to defend themselves.

"We are expecting an attack at any moment," he told Al Jazeera. "We are forming rotating watchgroups, guarding the neighbourhood."

Police stations and government offices inside the city have been torched and anti-Gaddafi graffiti painted on walls.

Hundreds of protesters in the city centre chanted "Gaddafi Out". An effigy of Gaddafi hung from a light pole in the main square.

Tripoli showdown

With much of the oil-producing regions, including the second city of Benghazi, in protesters' hands, the opposition is rapidly gearing up for a showdown in Tripoli.

The UN Security Council **imposed a travel and assets ban** on Gaddafi's government and, with exceptional unanimity, ordered an investigation into possible crimes against humanity by the Libyan strongman **[See a list of those targeted by the sanctions]**.

Hana Elgallal, a legal and human rights expert in Benghazi, said some in Libya will be disappointed that the UN did not impose a no-fly zone. "I'm one person who was hoping that we'd get that," she told Al Jazeera.

"We will not be able to move and help Tripoli because of the fear that he will use his planes. But whatever we get now we will look at it positively and consider it a victory and success.

"Hopefully things will escalate in our benefit soon to defuse the massacres in Tripoli."

The UN move come amid increased international criticism of Gaddafi's crackdown on protests. Barack Obama, the US president, has **called** on Gaddafi to "leave now."

The foreign minister of Italy, Gaddafi's closest European ally, said on Sunday that the end of the Libyan leader's rule was "inevitable".

Franco Frattini also said a friendship and co-operation treaty between Libya and Italy was "de facto suspended".

"We have reached, I believe, a point of no return," Frattini told Sky Italia television.

Australia has also moved to put pressure on the Libyan government by imposing unilateral sanctions. Kevin Rudd, the foreign minister, told Al Jazeera that more measures need to be taken against Gaddafi and his government.

"There is one critical element of the UN Security Council resolution, which we in Australia have strongly argued for, for the last week, and that is a reference to the International Criminal Court," he said.

"This is critical for the regime in Tripoli to understand. That is, if they take further actions of violence against innocent civilians in Libya, it is not just those who issue orders, but those who pull the trigger who will then become subject to the jurisdiction of the criminal court."

'Enemy of God'

His comments came as armed protesters in the eastern city of al-Baida threatened to march on to the capital.

Al Jazeera obtained video of the protesters who said they are planning to march on to Tripoli and claim to have seized tanks and weapons from the army.

Their claims came a day after hundreds of Tripoli residents, shouting "Gaddafi is the enemy of God" and shaking their fists, vowed on Saturday to fight Gaddafi at the funeral of a man killed by the Libyan leader's soldiers.

In a poor neighbourhood of the Libyan capital that is openly defiant of Gaddafi's more than 41-year-old rule, hundreds of men gathered to pay tribute to one of five people they said had been killed when troops fired on protesters late on Friday.

The number could not be independently confirmed.

"We will demonstrate again and again, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow," said Isham, 34, an engineer.

His voice breaking with emotion, another man, Ismail, said: "Gaddafi forces came here, they shot everywhere during a demonstration that was peaceful."

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

'Transitional government'

Meanwhile, Libya's former justice minister announced he was forming a "transitional government" to replace Gaddafi's crumbling regime, which now controls only some western areas around the capital and a few long-time bastions in the arid south, reporters and witnesses say.

In al-Baida, Mustafa Abdel Jalil said the new administration would include commanders of the regular army, many of who defected to the opposition, and would pave the way for free and fair elections in three months' time.

"Our national government has military and civilian personalities. It will lead for no more than three months, and then there will be fair elections and the people will choose their leader," Abdel Jalil said.

Al Jazeera's Tony Birtley, reporting from Benghazi, said people in the city "realise that at the end of the day, they are going to be responsible for the liberation of their entire country and they are taking steps to do that".

"There was a big meeting of the former justice minister who is leading this process and the tribal elders," our correspondent said.

"If anything signals the downfall of Gaddafi it's the fact that these tribes are coming together and they're showing unity and solidarity."

From Misurata, a major city 200km east of Tripoli, residents and exile groups said by telephone that a thrust by forces loyal to Gaddafi, operating from the local airport, had been rebuffed by the opposition.

"There were violent clashes last night and in the early hours of the morning near the airport," Mohammed, a resident of the town, said. "An extreme state of alert prevails in the city."

He said several mercenaries from Chad had been detained by the anti-Gaddafi opposition in Misurata. The report could not be verified but was similar to accounts elsewhere of Gaddafi deploying fighters brought in from African states where he has longstanding allies.