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www.afgazad.com

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Al Jazeera

Battles rage for control of Libyan towns

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Libya has witnessed more intense fighting as forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi, the country's embattled but defiant leader, continue to attack rebel positions across the North African state.

Undaunted by air strikes launched by coalition warplanes aimed at enforcing a no-fly zone, pro-Gaddafi forces have pressed ahead with their assaults on the towns of Misurata, Ajdabiya and Zintan in the past 24 hours.

Pro-democracy fighters ranged against him are finding the going tough. Mostly outgunned and with little command structure, they have been left to run sporadic raids against Gaddafi's troops, before falling back to their original lines.

But despite the little headway made by them, a rebel commander described the men as "real heroes".

"They are brave to the point of being suicidal," Mohamed Hariri told Al Jazeera.

Amid the continued fighting, Gaddafi insisted he was "ready for battle, be it long or short".

"We will win this battle," he said in an address during a public appearance at his Bab Al-Aziziyah compound in Tripoli that was the target on Sunday of a coalition missile strike, Libyan state television reported.

He also railed against the coalition forces, saying: "This assault ... is by a bunch of fascists who will end up in the dustbin of history."

"Interim government"

The overnight fighting left 14 people dead and 23 injured in Misurata, pro-democracy fighters told Al Jazeera's James Bays. He said they told him that "Gaddafi's forces have now taken over hospital in the town, and positioned snipers on the roof and tanks outside".

"The rebels are calling for a hospital ship to be sent in, as they still control the port, and say that would save many lives, as they now have nowhere to take their injured.

"More civilian deaths have been reported in Ajdabiya and elsewhere, and they calling on international powers to interpret the UN resolution more widely to support them with further attacks against Gaddafi's troops."

In addition, the Libyan transitional council has taken the step of calling themselves an "interim government". They had been wary of using the words before, seemingly cautious of signifying a split in the country. "But they remain committed to one Libya," our correspondent says. "They want the people of Libya to remain united, just without Gaddafi."

Heading up the new government as an interim prime minister is Mahmoud Jibril, who had been working as a representative to foreign powers. He is best known on the international stage for meeting France's Nicolas Sarkozy - which led to France diplomatically recognising the transitional council as the sole representative of the Libyan people.

When asked why a government had now been declared, a spokesman told Al Jazeera: "The provisional national council is a legislative body, but we need an executive body to take control and provide an administration."

"Our position has been very clear from the beginning, that Libya is one unit - our capital is Tripoli and will forever be Tripoli ... We are striving to liberate the western parts of the country, and Tripoli, and keep the country united. We would like to emphasise this over and over again."

Tripoli rocked

Overnight, anti-aircraft fire erupted over the Libyan capital, Tripoli for the fourth successive night.

"We've been hearing big noises," Al Jazeera's Anita McNaught, reporting from Tripoli, said.

"We haven't seen any smoke on the horizon. People are firing guns in defiance. We're in the loyalist heartland here where people are utterly defiant of the international effort to force Gaddafi to surrender, as they would see it.

"The anti-aircraft fire has not been as intense [as Monday night when two naval installations outside the city were hit]. Perhaps they feel in the immediate neighbourhood that most of the significant targets have already been hit."

The AFP news agency reported that at least two blasts were heard at a distance before the capital's air defences opened fire.

In the previous night's operations, the coalition air campaign suffered its first loss with the crash of a US fighter jet in the rebel-held east.

Both crew ejected safely.

The no-fly zone is intended to protect civilians from attack by forces loyal to Gaddafi. The United States announced on Tuesday that it is shifting its focus to widen the no-fly zone across the north African country.

Fight for towns

Forces loyal to Gaddafi have been shelling Misurata for days, pressing their siege of the embattled western city. Four children were killed in the shelling on Tuesday and at least 40 people were killed on Monday, a resident said.

Fighting for the towns of Ajdabiya and Zintan has been raging for days as well.

Al Jazeera's Tony Birtley, reporting from an area close to Ajdabiya, said there had been clashes outside the city.

"There's been heavy fighting and heavy shelling going on ... the rebels told me there have been heavy casualties and there are a number of corpses between here and the town [of Ajdabiya] that they have been unable to reach," he said.

Meanwhile, around 106km south of Tripoli, Libyan pro-democracy fighters forced government troops to withdraw from the outskirts of Zintan, breaking a siege of the town.

A resident of Zintan told the Reuters news agency that at least 10 people were killed in the bombardment by Gaddafi's forces.

"Gaddafi's forces bombarded Zintan this morning and killed 10 to 15 people," Abdulrahman said.

"After the bombardment they retreated from the eastern area of Zintan. But they have not withdrawn from the northern area. There is still a huge number of soldiers there, backed with 50 to 60 tanks and several vehicles."