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Al Jazeera

African leaders in Benghazi for peace talks

African Union mediators arrive in rebel stronghold in a bid to negotiate a ceasefire between Gaddafi and opposition.

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Libyan rebels have said that any ceasefire with Muammar Gaddafi would require the withdrawal of government troops from the streets and freedom of expression, as African mediators arrived in their stronghold of Benghazi.

Around 200 people waving Libyan rebel flags were gathered outside the airport when the high-level African Union delegation arrived on Monday, welcoming its efforts but demanding Gaddafi's overthrow.

"The people must be allowed to go into the streets to express their opinion and the soldiers must return to their barracks," Shamsiddin Abdulmolah, a spokesman for the rebels' Transitional National Council, told the AFP news agency.

"If people are free to come out and demonstrate in Tripoli, then that's it. I imagine all of Libya will be liberated within moments."

He also demanded the release of hundreds of people who have gone missing since the outbreak of the popular uprising and are believed to be held by Gaddafi's forces.

Jacob Zuma, the South African president, said Tripoli had accepted the African Union's plan for a ceasefire which would halt a NATO bombing campaign that destroyed 26 loyalist tanks on Sunday alone.

But the rebels doubt the [Libyan leader would adhere](#) to such a deal.

"The world has seen these offers of ceasefires before and within 15 minutes [Gaddafi] starts shooting again," Abdulmolah said.

The rebels have said they would negotiate a political transition to democracy with certain senior regime figures but only on the condition that Gaddafi and his sons leave the country.

Al Jazeera's Laurence Lee, reporting from Benghazi, said there is "clearly a question over what people think the motivation of the AU visit is."

People are asking whether it is a "genuine attempt at conflict resolution" or whether it is "an attempt by people who have close economic and political ties to Gaddafi to try and shore up the appearance of legitimacy," he said,

The [revolt against Gaddafi's 41-year reign](#) began as a wave of protests across the country in late February but soon escalated into a civil war after Gaddafi's troops fired on demonstrators and the rebels seized several eastern towns.

In recent weeks, Gaddafi's loyalist troops have [shelled Libya's third largest city, Misurata,](#) which has been the scene of fierce fighting and has been largely closed off to reporters.

Recapturing Ajdabiya

The government's troops have also pushed the rebels back on the eastern front, launching a major [attack on the town of Ajdabiya](#) on Saturday before being [repulsed by rebel forces](#).

Libyans outside the airport echoed the rebels' official demands, saying they appreciated the African Union's efforts but wanted Gaddafi to step down.

"The main thing we want is for Gaddafi and his family to get out and to be judged ... And we want the withdrawal of all troops from the towns," Azza Hussein, a doctor waiting with the crowds outside the airport, said.

"Gaddafi is a big liar, so we are afraid if there is a ceasefire he won't follow it," Abdullah Barud, 17, another protester, said.

In the 1990s, Gaddafi oriented Libya away from the Arab world and towards the sub-Sahara, calling for a ["United States of Africa"](#) and cultivating close ties with a number of rulers and some rebel movements.

Libya has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in tourism, telecommunications, banking and agriculture across several sub-Saharan countries via the Libya Africa Portfolio (LAP).

The rebels have accused Gaddafi of deploying [African mercenaries](#) against them - without

providing much hard evidence - and have said they would be raising the subject with the delegation.