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Herald Sun

Libya rebels say 10,000 killed in fighting

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THE UN said today it has sent food for 50,000 people to west Libya as aid groups scrambled to reach trapped civilians and rebels put the death toll from two months of fighting at 10,000.

One month after NATO allies dropped their first bombs on Muammar Gaddafi's forces, there appeared no end in sight to what experts are now warning will be a prolonged military stalemate in which civilians casualties will mount.

And with thousands clamouring to escape the besieged rebel city of Misrata, Britain said it will charter ships to pick up 5000 migrant workers after a ferry rescued nearly 1000 yesterday.

The UN's World Food Program said in Geneva it has opened up a lifeline from Tunisia.

"We've managed to open up an humanitarian corridor into western Libya," Emilia Casella, the WFP spokeswoman told journalists.

"A convoy of eight trucks loaded with 240 metric tonnes of wheat flour and 9.1 metric tons of high energy biscuits - enough to feed nearly 50,000 people for 30 days - crossed yesterday into western Libya from Ras Jedir crossing point at the Libyan-Tunisian border," the relief agency said.

Italy's Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said the Libya conflict has so far killed 10,000 people and wounded 55,000, citing figures compiled by the Benghazi-based rebel government.

"The president spoke to us of 10,000 dead and 50,000 to 55,000 injured," Frattini said after talks in Rome with Libyan rebel leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil.

Frattini also announced that Italy will host talks next month on allowing foreign oil sales from eastern Libya and could provide Libyan rebels with night-vision kit and radars.

He said after his meeting with Jalil that a meeting of the international contact group on Libya in Rome would discuss "legal instruments to allow the sale of oil products."

The meeting would also try to find ways of using assets owned by Gaddafi's regime that have been frozen around the world in order to aid the rebels and would discuss the thorny issue of arming the Libyan rebels, he said.

"We have condemned the violence of the regime in the streets, we have condemned the use of snipers in Tripoli and in the besieged cities.... We can't say this is not our problem," Frattini said.

Italy was weighing the possibility of sending "night-vision equipment, radars and technology to block communications," he said.

Jalil for his part told reporters he would favour international ties "above all" with France, Italy and Qatar - the countries that have recognised Libya's opposition.

Soon afterwards, Paris announced that French President Nicolas Sarkozy is to host Jalil to discuss the country's transition to democracy.

Sarkozy will meet the opposition leader at the Elysee Palace in Paris at 12.00am (2000 AEST), a statement said.

The UN refugee agency said meanwhile some 10,000 Libyans have fled in the last 10 days from the besieged western mountains region to Tunisia.

"UNHCR is seeing a growing number of Libyan refugees arriving in Tunisia from Libya's Western Mountains regions," Andrej Mahecic, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said in Geneva.

Libya's official news agency JANA reported that NATO air strikes on Tuesday hit the Libyan capital Tripoli; Sirte, Muammar Gaddafi's home town; and the town of Aziziyah, south of the capital,

There was no immediate indication of casualties or damage caused by the bombings.

France and Britain, which launched the first air strikes on March 19, have struggled to convince allies to intensify the air war while NATO commanders are scrambling to obtain even a few more ground-attack jets.

Politically, leaders in Paris, London and the US vowed in a joint letter last week to keep up the campaign until Gaddafi leaves power, but the resilient strongman has defied his one-time allies, and now Western foes.

"We are going to have to settle in for the long haul. Bombs won't make him go," said Nick Witney, European Council on Foreign Relations security expert, adding that it was up to the Libyan people to sort out their own future.

"I'm afraid that frustrating though it is, one has to accept that in military terms it is a stalemate, and it is going to stay that way until Libyans negotiate a solution to it. We just have to be patient," he said.

The UN meanwhile said Libya's government has granted "safe passage" for United Nations teams in Misrata.

Deputy UN spokesman Farhan Haq said the safe passage was part of an accord on humanitarian access to the capital and other Libyan cities secured in Tripoli on Sunday by UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos.

The Gaddafi government also agreed to let a UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs mission into Misrata, said UN humanitarian spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker.

"We want to assess the situation and determine the needs with our own eyes," Bunker told AFP.

But the head of the Red Crescent in Misrata was sceptical the regime would deliver on its promise, as snipers, cluster bombs and intense shelling spread panic in the city.

"Gaddafi says a lot of nonsense," Omar Abu Zaid told AFP. "We would like anything to help the people of Misrata. But we don't trust Gaddafi."

This morning, outgoing rocket fire was heard as the rebels appeared to be targeting the heavy armour of the government troops, as NATO warplanes flew overhead.