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NATO launches helicopter strikes in Libya

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NATO has for the first time used attack helicopters in Libya, striking military vehicles, military equipment and forces backing embattled leader Muammar Gaddafi, the military alliance has announced.

"Attack helicopters under NATO command were used for the first time on 4 June 2011 in military operations over Libya as part of Operation Unified Protector," NATO said in a statement on Saturday.

"The targets struck included military vehicles, military equipment and fielded forces" of the Gaddafi regime, said the statement without detailing exactly where the strikes had taken place.

"This successful engagement demonstrates the unique capabilities brought to bear by attack helicopters," Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard, commander in chief of the NATO mission in Libya, said.

"We will continue to use these assets whenever and wherever needed, using the same precision as we do in all of our missions," he added.

France was contributing four Tiger attack helicopters for the NATO operation while Britain offered four Apaches, officials said, adding that the helicopters were being prepared to fly over sea and desert conditions.

Major advance

The NATO offensive came as Libyan opposition fighters made a major advance towards the

capital, Tripoli, after claiming victory in western Libyan towns against forces loyal to Gaddafi.

An opposition military leader said on Friday that local fighters won control of four towns in the western Nafusa mountain range, where government forces had besieged and randomly shelled rebel-held areas for months.

Fighters who had fled then used their knowledge of the area to chip away at the government forces, Colonel Jumaa Ibrahim of the region's rebel military council told the Associated Press news agency via Skype.

"They know all the hills and valleys, so they were able to trick the brigades and destroy some of their vehicles," he said.

Opposition fighters also pushed government troops from Shakshuk and Qasr al-Haj, two towns near a key road that runs along the mountain range's northern edge, Ibrahim said.

After a brutal siege by pro-Gaddafi forces, Misurata, Libya's third largest city, is now in opposition hands. Opposition fighters there have now pushed halfway to the town of Zlitan, on the way to Tripoli, after taking control of Zintan.

At one stage, their advance came to within 60km of Sirte, but the government troops held their line and repelled the attack.

Meeting with rebels

Meanwhile, the Chinese foreign ministry said that China's ambassador to Qatar recently met the head of Libya's opposition council, the first known meeting between the two sides.

A Chinese foreign ministry statement said Zhang Zhiliang, Beijing's ambassador to Qatar, had met and "exchanged views on developments in Libya" with Mustafa Abdel Jalil, the chairman of the rebel council that is trying to offer itself as a credible temporary alternative to Gaddafi.

The ministry gave no details of the talks, but the meeting itself was an indication that Beijing wants to keep open lines of communication with the rebel forces.

China abstained in the UN Security Council vote authorising NATO military action in Libya.

Gaddafi's government has been slowly crumbling from within. A significant number of army officers and several cabinet ministers have defected, and most have expressed support for the opposition.

Rebels have turned down initiatives calling for ceasefires, insisting that Gaddafi and his sons must relinquish power and leave the country.