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afgazad@gmail.com

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Reuters

Clues to Gaddafi's death concealed from public view

By Rania El Gamal
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Libyan forces guarding Muammar Gaddafi's body in a cold storage room let in members of the public to view the deposed leader for a second day on Saturday, but the wounds that may hold the clue to how he died were covered up.

Gaddafi's body lay on a mattress on the floor of the cold room, as it did on Friday when hundreds of members of the public filed in to see for themselves that the man who ruled Libya for 42 years was dead.

But unlike the previous day, Gaddafi's body was covered by a blanket that left only his head exposed, hiding the bruises on his torso and scratch marks on his chest that had earlier been visible.

And, crucially, a Reuters reporter who viewed the body said, Gaddafi's head had been turned to the left. That meant a bullet hole that earlier could be seen on the left side of his face, just in front of his ear, could no longer be seen.

Guards overseeing Gaddafi's body handed out green surgical masks to dozens of people filing in to take a look because of the stench of rotting flesh filling the room.

The bullet hole in Gaddafi's head, and the other wounds, could help solve the riddle of whether, as Libya's new rulers said, he was shot in crossfire in a battle or, as some accounts suggest, he was killed by the fighters who caught him.

A local military commander in the city of Misrata, where the forces which captured him took his body, said "over-enthusiastic" fighters took matters into their own hands when they came face to face with the man they despise.

"We wanted to keep him alive but the young guys, things went out of control," he said speaking on condition of anonymity.

Few people in Libya -- where thousands of people, including civilians, were killed by Gaddafi's forces in the seven-month rebellion -- say they are troubled by the manner of his death.

But if he was indeed killed by his captors, it will cast doubt on the promises by Libya's new rulers to respect human rights and prevent reprisals. It would also embarrass Western governments which gave their wholehearted backing to the NTC.

MISSING PIECE

The dramatic minutes leading up to Gaddafi's death were chaotic, violent and gruesome -- as testified by the grainy mobile phone footage seen by the world of the former leader, bloodied and dazed, being dragged along by NTC fighters.

What is not captured in the footage, and is missing from accounts of the events given by fighters who were there, is how he died and who killed him.

Gaddafi was still alive when he was captured hiding in a storm drain outside his hometown of Sirte, but he already had blood streaming down the side of his face and a wound close to his left ear very shortly after he had been seized.

Government fighters hauled him onto the bonnet of a Toyota pick-up truck with the intention, one of them said, of getting him through the crowd of fellow fighters and to an ambulance parked about 500 meters (yards) away.

Gaddafi can be heard in one video saying "God forbids this" several times as slaps from the crowd rain down on his head.

"This is for Misrata, you dog," said one man slapping him.

"Do you know right from wrong?" Gaddafi says.

"Shut up you dog," someone replies as more blows rain down.

Misrata, one of the heartlands of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion, suffered months of siege and artillery bombardment at the hands of his forces.

Another video shows Gaddafi being heaved off the bonnet of the truck and dragged toward a car, then pulled down by his hair. "Keep him alive, keep him alive!" someone shouts.

But another man in the crowd lets out a high-pitched hysterical scream. Gaddafi then goes out of view and gunshots ring out. One of the fighters present said Gaddafi was in a bad way but alive when he was put in the ambulance.

Yet the ambulance driver, Ali Jaghdoun, said Gaddafi was dead when he picked him up and he then drove the body to the city of Misrata. "I didn't try to revive him because he was already dead," Jaghdoun said.

WOUNDS STITCHED UP

In the cold store in Misrata, the body of one of Gaddafi's sons, Mo'tassim, had been moved from another location elsewhere in Misrata and placed next to his dead father.

The circumstances leading to the death of Mo'tassim, his father's national security adviser who was also captured in Sirte, are similarly murky.

A Reuters reporter was shown a one-minute segment of mobile phone footage in which a man, who resembled Mo'tassim, was squatting in a room. He was stripped to the waist, and smoking a cigarette. He did not appear badly wounded.

Someone could be heard telling him repeatedly: "Say Allahu Akbar, say Allahu Akbar." The phrase, which means "God is greatest," is a favorite mantra of the anti-Gaddafi fighters.

At some point after that, he died. When a Reuters reporter saw his body on Thursday evening, it was laid out in a private house in Misrata. Wounds to his jaw and part of his neck were visible.

On Saturday in the cold store, Mo'tassim's body was covered up to the neck with a blanket. The wounds to his jaw and neck had been stitched up.

Later in the day, the body of a third man, Abu Bakr Younus Jabr, was brought in and placed on a stretcher between Gaddafi and his son.

Head of Gaddafi's armed forces, by then just a handful of troops, Jabr was captured in Sirte alongside his leader. A bandage was tied under his chin and looped over the top of his head.

Bullet wounds could be seen to his chest and the top of his left arm. A Reuters reporter who was able to get close to the body said she could see gunpowder residue around the wounds -- which is often consistent with being shot at close range.

The people queuing outside the cold store, waiting to view the bodies, did not seem concerned about how their former leader and his entourage died.

Two Filipino nurses filed in to take pictures. Children were among the few dozen people waiting outside for their turn.

Abdullah al-Senussi, a man with a white beard, was so frail he had to be supported by people on either side of him as he made his way to the cold store.

"We wanted to know if it was true or not," he said. "We wanted to see him."

Two men arrived waving airline tickets, saying they needed to jump the queue to see Gaddafi or they would miss their flights.

Asked if it would not have been better for Gaddafi to stand trial, Abdulatif, a pilot waiting in line, said: "What would he tell the mother whose children were killed or the girls who were raped?"

"If he lived and was killed a thousand times, that would still only be a trifle."