

Qaddafi's bid to crush a revolution

Friday 25 February 2011, by [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2011).

Eric Ruder reports on the protests in Libya as the future hangs in the balance.

A man carries the partial remains of a fellow protester from a hospital in Benghazi
THE REGIME of Libyan dictator Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi is trying to drown an anti-government uprising in blood.

Forces loyal to Qaddafi were carrying out a deadly assault on anti-government protesters in the capital of Tripoli and other cities. According to press reports, helicopter gunships and tanks were used to fire on protesters, and several hundred people are dead and wounded. "It was an obscene amount of gunfire," according to one eyewitness. "They were strafing these people. People were running in every direction."

But the horrific scale of the assault may fracture the regime. Libyan diplomats in China, India, Britain, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Poland and at the Arab League announced their resignations. And some troops and air force pilots refused to fire, joining the side of the pro-democracy demonstrators. In Washington, Ali Aujali, Libya's ambassador to the U.S., called on Qaddafi to step down.

The uprising intensified on Monday, after Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, the colonel's son, appeared on state television late Sunday night to deliver a rambling and belligerent speech that basically described the previous week of protests as the work of foreign agents. "Muammar el-Qaddafi, our leader, is leading the battle in Tripoli, and we are with him," he said. "The armed forces are with him. Tens of thousands are heading here to be with him. We will fight until the last man, the last woman, the last bullet."

But the speech spurred an angry response from protesters, who flooded into the streets of Tripoli and fought pitched battles with heavily armed riot police to take Green Square, the capital city's central plaza. By dawn, government buildings and police stations were smoldering across the city, the legislature was in flames, and protesters had torn down or torched the many posters of Col. Qaddafi throughout the city.

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WITH QADDAFI'S grasp on power beginning to slip, he seems to have ordered his forces to use the utmost violence. Heavily armed militia descended on Green Square and opened fire on protesters, forcing them to flee and clearing the way for pro-Qaddafi crowds to retake the square.

Qaddafi has formidable repressive powers at his disposal in this country of 6 million sandwiched between Egypt and Tunisia, where two hated dictators have already fallen since the start of the year. According to the BBC:

"The regime...has powerful forces, totaling 119,000, at its disposal and, in the past, it has never hesitated to use them if it felt threatened...Quite apart from the 45,000-strong army and the police, where loyalties have, on occasion, been uncertain, there is the mukhabarat (the security service) and

the Revolutionary Committee movement, which has brutally disciplined Libyan society ever since the 1980s.

Its activists are committed to the regime by tribal affiliation as well as ideological preference, for they are drawn from the regime's tribal bulwark in the Qadhadhfa, the Maghraha and the Warfalla and, as revolutionaries, they are entirely unaccountable to anyone except the colonel himself." [1]

The troops that remain loyal to the regime are showing no mercy in their suppression of the uprising. "The shooting is not designed to disperse the protesters," one Tripoli resident told the *New York Times*. "It is meant to kill them."

But the pro-democracy demonstrators have taken control of large areas, reportedly with the aid of units of the military that have taken their side against the regime. Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city that historically has been a stronghold of anti-Qaddafi opposition and was the spark for the revolt, had already come under the control of pro-democracy demonstrators after six days of protests and brutal government violence.

A young woman in Benghazi, who is a student and a blogger, tearfully described the ferocity of the several days of revolt to the *Guardian*:

"I've seen violent movies and video games that are nothing compared to this...I can hear gunshots, helicopters circling overhead, then I hear the voices screaming. I can hear the screeching of four-by-fours in the street. No one has that type of car except his [Qaddafi's] people...My brother went to get bread, he's not back; we don't know if he'll get back. The family is up all night every night, keeping watch, no one can sleep.

Now people are dying; we've got nothing else to live for. What needs to happen is for the killing to stop. But that won't happen until he is out. We just want to be able to live like human beings...It's like a pressure cooker. People are boiling up inside. I'm not even afraid any more. Once, I wouldn't have spoken at all by phone. Now I don't care. Now enough is enough." [2]

When protesters took control of Benghazi's main security headquarters, they declared it liberated—and broadcast their success by taking over the state television station.

In retaliation, the Qaddafi regime appeared ready to order a merciless assault on Benghazi, but defections of air force pilots saved the city from a night of violence. According to British blogger Richard Seymour:

"Benghazi, where the regime had been totally defeated and sent packing, was set to be the target of vengeful air strikes tonight—except that two of the planes ordered to attack reportedly landed in the city, the pilots refusing to drop their payload. The city has been declared safe for now." [3]

Elsewhere, police and soldiers joined the side of protesters, and a number of pilots reportedly flew their planes to Malta and then requested political asylum from the government there.

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LIBYA IS North Africa's richest country, owing to its significant oil deposits, most of which is exported to Western countries. But only a tiny elite benefits from the country's abundance of black gold. In recent years, Qaddafi's regime has done little to address the desperate poverty, especially among the country's largely young population—the same demographic that has driven forward revolts against dictators in country after country in the region. According to Andrew Solomon:

"The state provides little by way of civil society and does not take care of even the most basic government obligations. There are police to control people who stray from supporting the Leader, but there is little else. As a housing crisis has escalated in the past few years, the regime has made no effort to provide adequate public accommodation."

Wealth is concentrated in the hands of the very few. It would have been easy for Qaddafi to raise the standard of living for the population as a whole either by creating a sustainable non-oil economy or simply by distributing some portion of oil revenues, but he chose to do neither." [4]

But none of this has kept U.S. officials from cultivating warm relations with Qaddafi since 2004 when the administration of George W. Bush ended the U.S. trade embargo on Libya, clearing the way for Libya's oil to flow to Western countries.

Following the same script as in Tunisia and Egypt, U.S. officials suddenly discovered their "shock" and "horror" at the regime's murderous repression—after backing it for years. The pathetic response of the Obama administration angered activists like Libyan-American scientist Naeem Gheriany:

"The Obama administration made a comment suggesting that there are still opportunities for reform. It is in denial. It says it's 'concerned' about the situation—there's no real condemnation in spite of the dire situation. People are being massacred in the hundreds, Qaddafi is reportedly using anti-aircraft guns to shoot people. In a few days, more people in Libya have apparently been killed than in weeks in Iran, Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen and even Egypt (which has a much larger population). Qaddafi is hiring foreign mercenaries who have shoot-to-kill orders, it's not tear gas, it's just killing."

The possible toppling of the Libyan regime is furthering the worry in Washington as decades of diplomacy to construct an alliance of pro-Western Arab dictators in the Middle East continues to crumble. And the possible disruption of Libya's oil exports, at a time when prices are already spiking, is causing heartburn among speculators, according to the *New York Times*:

"Market stability in the United States and abroad depends on the price of oil leveling off, which seems unlikely given all the turmoil. Western countries fear being cut off from the oil supply in Libya, which exports about 1.5 million barrels of oil a day, making it one of Africa's largest holders of crude oil reserves. There was ample reason for concern, as oil companies—including Eni of Italy, the largest energy producer in Libya—began to evacuate employees." [5]

Early Tuesday morning, Qaddafi appeared on state television to show his defiance of the protests and dispel rumors that he had fled to Venezuela. But it remains unclear how much authority Qaddafi retains—and how much bloodshed he is capable of commanding in his drive to terrorize the opposition into surrender. According to Solomon:

"The response to protests has been swift and brutal, since Qaddafi had seen how ineffective more moderate responses were in Egypt and Tunisia. It is not clear, however, that brutality will work; it appears to be making more and more Libyans incensed. A Libyan diplomat said today, 'The more Qaddafi kills people, the more people go into the streets.' Qaddafi's power has for a long time relied on the docility of ordinary Libyans. As he ignored the youth of his country, though, he seems to have ignored the possibility that he is ruling a less passive population. The new generation is ready to push out the old."

Activists around the world should be ready to organize protests to expose the complicity and hypocrisy of Western powers as the Qaddafi regime attempts to use lethal force against the challenge to its rule.

P.S.

* From Socialist Worker, February 22, 2011:

<http://socialistworker.org/2011/02/22/qaddafi-tries-to-crush-revolt>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12532579>

[2] See on ESSF: [Libya protests: gunshots, screams and talk of revolution](#).

[3] See on ESSF: [Libya: A regime in mortal freefall](#)

[4] See on ESSF: [How Qaddafi lost Libya](#)

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/22/business/global/22markets.html?_r=1