

Gaddafi loyalists hold off new Libyan attacks

Reuters

September 19 , 2011

Anti-Gaddafi fighters fire a 130mm howitzer at pro-Gaddafi forces near east of Sirte September 16, 2011. REUTERS/Asmaa WaguihBy Maria Golovnina and Alexander Dziadosz

BANI WALID/SIRTE (Libya), Sept 17 (Reuters) - Diehard loyalists of Muammar Gaddafi threw rockets, mortars and heavy gunfire at Libyan fighters who pushed into two besieged towns on Friday in a bid to end months of civil war and capture key figures from the old ruling system.

The smoke of battle hung over Gaddafi's home town of Sirte, on the Mediterranean coast between Tripoli and Benghazi, and Bani Walid, a tribal stronghold in the desert, as the motley forces of the National Transitional Council (NTC) mounted their biggest advances after weeks of stalemate and skirmishing.

But the word coming back from the frontlines to Reuters correspondents on the outskirts of both cities was that fierce defence was not being overcome quickly, nearly four weeks after the rebel coalition overran Gaddafi's capital.

Libya's new leaders are getting on with the business of government, trying to impose order on a host of irregular armed forces and restart the oil-based economy. Their latest foreign visitor was Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who hailed the fate of Gaddafi as an example to Turkey's Syrian neighbour.

He also called on the people of Sirte to give up the fight and make peace, though in neither town did that seem imminent.

"It's a very strong resistance," Abusif Ghnyah, a spokesman for the NTC forces at Bani Walid, told reporters watching the battle from high ground. "The most difficult part is the central market, that is where they are firing from."

A Reuters correspondent watched anti-Gaddafi fighters move forward under mortar, rocket and sniper fire, edging from house to house and sheltering behind walls from shrapnel and bullets.

A faux-ancient castle built for Gaddafi on a hill in the centre of Bani Walid was also under attack, fighters said.

Many of the town's 100,000 residents fled in recent days.

It was also unclear how many civilians remain in Sirte, a sprawling city of a similar size, which Gaddafi created out of his native village. NTC fighters, who brought up scores of machinegun-mounted pickup trucks and a handful of tanks, spoke of scattered pockets of heavily armed opponents dug in there.

DESERT SKIRMISHING

Contact has not been possible with Gaddafi loyalists inside the two towns, as well as at Sabha, deep in Libya's southern desert where several senior Gaddafi aides have been lately.

Details of developments around Sabha are scant, but a British military spokesman said that British jets had fired about two dozen Brimstone missiles to destroy a group of Libyan armoured vehicles near the desert town on Thursday.

Erdogan, visiting a day after the French and British leaders credited by the NTC with rallying support for them, displayed NATO-member Turkey's Muslim credentials by joining NTC chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil for Friday prayers at the newly renamed Martyrs' Square, once a showcase for Gaddafi.

"From here I call out to Sirte," he said of the beleaguered city. "Come, right now. Some 10,000 brothers and sisters are hungry and thirsty -- embrace your brothers in Tripoli.

"Spilling blood does not suit us. Let us come together."

Gaddafi, 69, is still at large and commanding loyalty from at least hundreds of armed men, concentrated from Sirte, through Bani Walid and Sabha, creating a corridor in the vast empty spaces of the desert through which members of Gaddafi's family and senior aides have reached Algeria and Niger.

The new leadership, struggling to maintain unity and restore order as international powers line up to offer aid and seek contracts for oil and reconstruction contracts, says Gaddafi and his sons and aides pose a threat, at the very least of insurgent attacks, and wants to capture their last bastions.

BANI WALID FIGHTING

At Bani Walid, truckloads of NTC fighters shouting "Let's go! Bani Walid!" and columns of pickup trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns had advanced on the town in early morning.

"We are going in. We finally have the orders," Mohammed Ahmed said, his rifle sticking out of his car window. "God is greatest. God willing, Bani Walid will be free today."

However, the going proved slow. Throughout the day, there was heavy fighting, though casualties among the cautious government forces appeared light -- a spokesman said three were wounded -- as they moved forward, setting up supply dumps and dressing stations to support the advancing front. Mortars and Grad rockets landed around the government lines outside.

"It is a very strong resistance," fighter Isham al-Nasser said as he returned from the frontline in a truck convoy.

In the northern outskirts, streets were deserted with few civilians in sight. Houses were peppered with bullet holes.

Local farmer Mohamed Khalil Mohamed, 31, said the end of the siege and victory for Gaddafi's opponents would be welcome: "At first we were afraid because we didn't know who they were but now that we have seen them, we are very happy."

The traditional stronghold of Libya's biggest tribal grouping, Bani Walid's complex mix of loyalties is a proving ground for the ability of the new leadership in Tripoli to hold together a nation whose historic divisions Gaddafi exploited during his 42 years of personal, and often bloody, rule.

NTC fighters said they had arrested several suspected Gaddafi loyalists. But one such man, sitting on the back of a pickup truck in handcuffs, protested his innocence.

"I'm not with the militia, I'm innocent. I'm free to support whoever I want," said the man, clutching a green medallion -- a symbol of Gaddafi support.

"I did not kill anyone, I did not do anything," he said, looking frightened but unhurt.

SIRTE ASSAULT

At Sirte, NTC fighters massed around a breeze-block mosque on the outskirts, while others drove on towards the centre accompanied by two tanks. Mohammed, a 23-year-old fighter from the city of Misrata said the resistance was coming from pockets of Gaddafi supporters dotted around a city which Gaddafi developed from a village into a would-be "capital of Africa".

"They have got heavy weapons," he said. "Gaddafi has been gathering heavy weapons for 42 years ... We are regrouping, pulling back, hitting them with heavy weapons and then advancing again."

Al Jazeera television said NTC forces had taken Sirte's airport, which lies some 10 km (six miles) south of the city.

Gaddafi's spokesman said he had thousands of supporters.

"We are telling you that as of tomorrow there will be atrocious attacks by NATO and their agents on the ground on the resisting towns of Sirte, Bani Walid and Sabha," Moussa Ibrahim told Syrian-based Arrai television late on Thursday.

The television said 16 people had been killed in Sirte, including women and children, as a result of NATO bombing, and that Gaddafi forces had destroyed a NATO warship and vehicles.

A NATO spokesman dismissed those claims and said its air forces struck military targets, including a tank and several missile systems, but was unaware of any civilian casualties.

"It is clear," he said, "That Gaddafi forces are once again trying to spread rumours, claiming unsubstantiated victories and attempting to terrorise the local population."

© REUTERS 2011

Copyright REUTERS 2011. REUTERS text, photos, graphics and logos shall not be reproduced, published, broadcast, rewritten for broadcast or publication or redistributed directly or indirectly in any medium. REUTERS shall not be held liable for any delays, inaccuracies, errors or omissions in any REUTERS content, or for any actions taken in consequence

Source: <http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/bm/newsworld.php?id=613994>