

Gaddafi vows to fight, Libya conference begins

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TRIPOLI, Sept 1 — Muammar Gaddafi, driven into hiding by his foes, today urged his supporters to fight on, even as Libya's new interim rulers met world leaders to discuss reshaping a nation torn by 42 years of one-man rule and six months of war.

"Let there be a long fight and let Libya be engulfed in flames," Gaddafi was quoted as saying in a message carried on Arabic news channels. "We will not give up. We are not women."

The fugitive leader was speaking on the 42nd anniversary of the military coup that toppled King Idris and brought him to power in 1969 when he was a 27-year-old army captain.

There have been conflicting reports about Gaddafi's location since his Tripoli compound was overrun on August 23.

A senior military commander of the interim National Transitional Council (NTC) said Gaddafi was in a desert town outside Tripoli, along with his son Saif al-Islam and intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi, planning a fight-back.

All three fugitives are wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity.

Abdel Majid Mlegta, coordinator of the Tripoli military operations room, told Reuters "someone we trust" had said Gaddafi had fled to Bani Walid, 150km southeast of the capital, three days after Tripoli fell.

An Algerian newspaper said Gaddafi was in the border town of Ghadamis and had tried to call Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to appeal for refuge. Bouteflika would not take the call, even though Algeria gave sanctuary to Gaddafi's wife and three of his children when they crossed the border on Monday.

The NTC, trying to mop up pro-Gaddafi forces, extended by a week a Saturday deadline for the surrender of the coastal city of Sirte, Gaddafi's birthplace, and other hold-out towns.

"That means there's progress in the negotiations," said Mohammed Zawawi, an NTC spokesman in the eastern city of Benghazi. "We're not in a rush to get in to Sirte. It has no economic importance and we're not going to lose casualties for it. We can cut supplies and wait, even more than a week."

The extension follows a peace feeler from one of Gaddafi's sons, Saadi, yesterday.

"We were talking about negotiations based on ending bloodshed," Saadi told al-Arabiya TV, adding that his father had authorised him to parley with the NTC.

The head of Tripoli's military council, Abdul Hakim Belhadj, told Reuters the same day he had spoken to Saadi by telephone and promised him decent treatment if he surrenders.

The war may not be over until Gaddafi is killed or captured, but Libyans are keen to move

on.

Russian recognition

Libya's new leaders gathered with their foreign allies in Paris to coordinate political and economic reconstruction. Some participants will also be jostling for a share in postwar contracts in the wealthy North African oil and gas producer.

Russia recognised the NTC before the conference opened. It had abstained from a UN Security Council vote in March that allowed Western military intervention in Libya but then repeatedly accused Nato forces of overstepping their mandate to protect civilians and of siding with rebels in the civil war.

Some in Libya suggest that Tripoli may slight nations like Russia and China in favour of stalwarts of the intervention such as Britain, France, the United States and Qatar.

China's official People's Daily newspaper told the West to let the United Nations lead reconstruction in Libya and said Beijing would defend its economic stake there.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he sought a closer trade relationship between Libya and Europe and said Britain would not miss out on its share of contracts.

"We won't be left behind," he told reporters before the Paris talks.

Eager to meet immediate civilian needs, the NTC is expected to push for rapid access to billions of dollars in foreign-held Libyan assets frozen under UN sanctions on Gaddafi.

The United Nations has already authorised the release of more than US\$5 billion (RM15 billion) in previously frozen assets held in the United States, Britain and France.

It may be hard to get reconstruction going and persuade foreign investors to return to Libya as long as Gaddafi remains at large and the NTC is not in full control of the country.

Mlegta, the NTC military leader, said Gaddafi wanted to set up a base in Bani Walid to orchestrate attacks. Appeals to notables in the town to hand him over had gone unanswered.

He said Ali al-Ahwal, Gaddafi's coordinator for tribes, was also in Bani Walid, a stronghold of the powerful Warfalla tribe, Libya's biggest at about a million strong among a population of six million, but by no means solidly pro-Gaddafi.

"We are capable of ending the crisis but military action is out of the question right now," Mlegta said. "We cannot attack this tribe because many of our brigades in Benghazi and Zintan are from Bani Walid. The sons of Bani Walid hold the key."

NTC fighters said on Tuesday they were 30km from Bani Walid. Nato air strikes hit several rocket launchers near Sirte on Wednesday, as well as an ammunition storage facility and a military command post near Bani Walid, a Nato spokesman said.

Devastated country

With Gaddafi driven from power, the Friends of Libya conference in Paris gives the NTC its first platform to address the world. Its chairman, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, will outline plans for a

new constitution, elections within 18 months and ways to avoid any descent into postwar Iraq-style bloodletting.

"We have to help the National Transitional Council because the country is devastated, the humanitarian situation is difficult and there's a lack of water, electricity and fuel," French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said on RTL radio.

Tripoli has enough fuel for now and food is starting to get through, but there is no end in sight to its water shortage, according to the European Union's humanitarian office (ECHO).

Britain flew 40 tonnes of freshly printed bank notes, many bearing Gaddafi's image, into Libya yesterday to help pay public workers and replenish bank cash machines.

The 280 million Libyan dinars, officially worth about US\$234 million, is part of a consignment worth about US\$1.5 billion blocked by Britain in March after he cracked down on protests.

EU sanctions on six Libyan ports, several oil firms and banks will end tomorrow, EU officials said. — Reuters

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