

'Zero hour' for Gaddafi as besieged Tripoli rises up
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TRIPOLI, Aug 21 — Explosions and gunfire rocked Tripoli through the night as opponents of Muammar Gaddafi rose up in the capital, declaring a final push to topple the Libyan leader after a six-month war reached the city's outskirts.

A defiant Gaddafi said an assault by "rats" had been repelled.

"Those rats ... were attacked by the masses tonight and we eliminated them," Gaddafi said in an audio message broadcast over state television early today.

"I know that there are air bombardments but the fireworks were louder than the sound of the bombs thrown by the aircraft."

Intense gunfire erupted after nightfall. Reuters journalists in the centre of the capital said it subsided somewhat after several hours, but bursts of machinegun fire and explosions could still be heard in the pre-dawn hours, indicating fighting in several neighbourhoods.

"The zero hour has started. The rebels in Tripoli have risen up," Abdel Hafiz Ghoga, vice-chairman of the rebel National Transitional Council, based in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, told Reuters.

Gaddafi's influential former number two, Abdel Salam Jalloud, who defected to the rebel cause a day earlier, appeared on television in Rome and called on the capital to rise against "the tyrant". "Tonight you claim victory over fear," he said.

The clashes inside the capital triggered massive street celebrations in Benghazi as well as elsewhere in the country and in the capital of neighbouring Tunisia.

Gaddafi's information minister said the rebel incursion into the city had been quickly put down.

Rebel advances on Tripoli have transformed the war since they seized the city of Zawiyah on Tripoli's Western outskirts a week ago, cutting the capital off from its main road link to the outside world and putting unprecedented pressure on Gaddafi.

Before dawn, state television showed Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam addressing what it called a youth conference. A roomful of supporters broke into occasional chants and applause as he declared that the rebels would be defeated.

"The revolt in Libya will not succeed. You will never see us as Libyans surrender and raise the white flag: that is impossible. This is our country and we will never leave it."

Fighting rages

Fighting was still raging after midnight around Mitiga airbase in Tripoli's Tajourah district, an area said to be under rebel control, an opposition activist told a Reuters journalist outside Libya.

The gun battles left a number of rebels dead in the suburb of Qadah and elsewhere, along

with at least three pro-Gaddafi soldiers in the Zawiyat al-Dahmania district of Tripoli, he said.

A Tripoli resident told Reuters that Muslim clerics in parts of Tripoli had called on people to rise up, using the loudspeakers on minarets. The resident said the call went out around the time people were breaking their Ramadan fast.

"We can hear shooting in different places," one resident said. "Most of the regions of the city have gone out, mostly young people ... it's the uprising... They went out after breaking the (Ramadan) fast."

"They are shouting religious slogans: 'God is greatest!'"

Washington says Gaddafi's days are numbered, and reports have emerged of more defections from his ranks. President Barack Obama, on vacation in Martha's Vineyard, was receiving regular updates on Libya, a senior White House official said.

"If Tripoli eventually falls to the rebels, Gaddafi's already limited options become even more limited. Pressure on him and his shrinking circle of loyalists has to be taking a serious toll," a senior White House official said.

Rebels said yesterday they had thwarted an attempt by Gaddafi's forces to recapture Zawiyah.

"Gaddafi will try to take back Zawiyah at any price. He will keep shelling the hospital," a rebel fighter said as he prepared for midday prayers in the mosque of Bir Hawisa, a nearby village where many civilians are sheltering. "We will not let that happen. We will fight." — Reuters

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