

**Libyan rebels overrun Gaddafi HQ, say he's 'finished'**  
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TRIPOLI, Aug 24 — Libyan rebels sacked Muammar Gaddafi's Tripoli bastion, seizing weapons and smashing symbols of a 42-year dictatorship whose demise will transform modern Libya and send a warning to other Arab autocrats under popular pressure, especially in Syria.

As night fell yesterday after a day in which rebels overran Tripoli, meeting little resistance with few casualties, heavy fighting was reported in a southern desert city, Sabha, that insurgents forecast would be Gaddafi loyalists' last redoubt.

And forces loyal to Gaddafi were shelling Zuara, a Libyan Mediterranean port town west of Tripoli about 60km from the Tunisian border, Al-Arabiya television reported.

In Tripoli itself, Reuters correspondents said there still appeared to be some hostile fire around the city centre as darkness descended and looting broke out.

The continued shooting suggested the six-month popular insurgency against Gaddafi, a maverick Arab nationalist who defied the West and kept an iron hand on his oil-exporting, country for four decades, had not completely triumphed yet.

But Gaddafi was already history in the eyes of the rebels and their political leaders planned high-level talks in Qatar today with envoys of the United States, Britain, France, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates on the way ahead.

Another meeting was scheduled for tomorrow in Istanbul.

"It's over! Gaddafi is finished!" yelled a fighter over a din of celebratory gunfire across the Bab al-Aziziya compound, Gaddafi's sprawling citadel of power in the Libyan capital.

Late yesterday, rebels extended their control of Tripoli to the Abu Salim neighbourhood, a senior insurgent spokesman said, referring to one of Gaddafi's main hubs of support.

Opinion was divided about Gaddafi's whereabouts. Colonel Ahmed Bani told Al-Arabiya TV that rebels believed Gaddafi was probably holed up in one of many hideouts in Tripoli. "It will take a long time to find him," he said.

Qatar-based Al-Jazeera TV said late yesterday that the rebels were now in full control of Tripoli airport.

Rebel National Council chief Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, who was until February a loyal minister of Gaddafi, cautioned: "It is too early to say that the battle of Tripoli is over. That won't happen until Gaddafi and his sons are captured."

Keep revolution clean, rebel leader says

Mahmoud Jibril, head of the rebel government, promised a transition towards a democracy for all Libyans. "The whole world is looking at Libya," he said, warning against summary justice.

"We must not sully the final page of the revolution."

Jibril said they had formed a new body including field commanders from a variety of local revolutionary groups to coordinate security. There is a long history of friction among villages and tribes, Arabs and ethnic Berbers, and between the east and west of a state formed as an Italian colony in 1934.

Western powers who backed the revolt with air power held off from pronouncing victory although they are keen for a swift return to order, given fears that ethnic and tribal divisions among the insurgents could degenerate into the kind of anarchy that would thwart hopes of Libya resuming oil exports.

But the fall of Gaddafi, with the arresting images on Arab satellite TV of rebels stomping through his inner sanctum and laying waste to the props of his long unaccountable domination, could be a shot in the arm for other revolts in the Arab world.

It could underline that entrenched authoritarian leaders are no longer invincible, particularly in Syria where popular unrest has widened despite ever fiercer military crackdowns by President Bashar al-Assad.

#### Trashing Gaddafi

At the Bab al-Aziziya, long a no-go area, armed men broke up a gilded statue of Gaddafi, kicking its face. Others ripped up his portrait or climbed on a monument depicting a clenched fist, which Gaddafi erected after a US air strike in 1986.

Another rebel sported a heavily braided, peaked military cap of a kind favoured by the colonel, who seized power in 1969. He said he had taken the hat from Gaddafi's bedroom.

"House to house! Room to room!" chanted some men at Bab al-Aziziya, calling for a search of its bunkers and tunnels in a mocking echo of the words Gaddafi used six months ago when he vowed to crush the early stirrings of the Arab Spring revolt.

Abdel Hakim Belhadj, a rebel commander, said he did not know where Gaddafi or his sons were. "They ran like rats."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said: "We're in the death throes of this regime ... But it's still a very difficult and dangerous time. It's not over yet."

#### Arab spring

Last night, dozens of youths danced in Tripoli's Green Square, another Gaddafi showpiece arena. They waved the red, green and black flag of the rebels to the sound of gunfire, though most of the city's two million people prudently stayed indoors.

One man greeted the fall of a third autocrat brought low by the Arab Spring and forecast others would share their fate: "1. Tunisia 2. Egypt 3. Libya? Syria? Yemen," his sign read.

Rebel officials, who said they hoped to move from Benghazi in the east to the capital this week, spoke of trying Gaddafi in Libya rather than sending him to The Hague, where he and two others have been indicted by the International Criminal Court.

The Russian head of the International Chess Federation, who had visited Tripoli in June, told Reuters Gaddafi called him yesterday to say he would stay in Tripoli and "fight to the end."

But he had few places to make a stand. His home town of Sirte, on the Mediterranean coast between Tripoli and rebel Benghazi, was expected to welcome rebel forces shortly, Abdel-Jalil said. But Jibril spoke of a need still to "liberate" southern desert areas like Sabha and of fighting there.

"It really looks like it's pretty much over," said David Hartwell, a Middle East analyst at IHS here might be a few diehards who would keep going until he is captured or killed, but not many. And if Gaddafi didn't have many places to hide before, he has even fewer now."

After a prolonged desultory ebb and flow of battle across the desert, rebel forces galvanised by Western advisers, Nato air strikes and, presumably, shadowy foreign commandos, swept into Tripoli at the weekend to the cheers of many residents.

Rebel leader Abdel-Jalil said Nato bombs had helped his men breach the walls of the Bab al-Aziziya yesterday.

In the east of the country, government troops were pulling out of areas that are key to oil production, rebels said.

The US State Department, in a signal of the kind of activity likely to gather pace in diplomatic meetings over the coming days, said it was seeking the immediate release of up to \$1.5 billion (RM4.5 billion) of frozen Libyan government assets to the rebels.

Washington, along with France, Italy, Britain and Qatar, will hope for diplomatic and business benefits for their backing, at the expense of Russia, China and others who were slow to abandon Gaddafi after a UN vote condemning him.

Western leaders rule out sending troops but have put in civilian advisers to bolster efforts to create institutions in Libya that can replace the personality cult around Gaddafi, who has ruled as long as most Libyans can remember. — Reuters

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