

Gaddafi forces use 'scare tactics' in Sirte, say rebels
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ABU GREIN, Libya, Aug 29 — Forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi in his home town of Sirte are urging people to fight or be killed by bloodthirsty attackers, complicating efforts to arrange a peaceful surrender of the city, opponents of the Libyan leader said today.

A rebel fighter patrols with other rebels in the town of Abu Grein, 128km west of Sirte. — Reuters pic
Anti-Gaddafi forces are approaching Sirte, 450km east of Tripoli by road, from east and west. They say they would rather not fight for the city but talks seem stalled.

"I can't say there's any real progress because we have difficulty with the regime people from Tripoli," said Hassan Droy, the National Transitional Council (NTC) representative for Sirte, who is based in the eastern city of Benghazi.

"They're trying to tell the people that the battle is no longer for Gaddafi but to protect themselves," he told Reuters, adding that three days ago a message from Gaddafi was broadcast in Sirte, urging people to fight to save themselves.

Gaddafi's own whereabouts are unknown.

Another spokesman, Mohammad Zawawi, said Gaddafi loyalists were telling people that the rebels wanted to kill them. "But we are sending a clear message that our troops won't kill anyone."

That message had been passed via satellite telephone to rebel sympathisers in Sirte, who were spreading it, he said.

Sirte, which Gaddafi developed from a small village to a city of 100,000 people, is the ousted leader's last bastion on the coast, where most of Libya's six million people live. Many of the city's residents belong to his Gaddafa tribe.

Rebels convoys

A convoy of rebel pickup trucks filled with fighters inched slowly toward Sirte from the west today, taking control of the small desert outpost of Abu Grein, 130km from Sirte.

"We are cleaning up this area," said rebel fighter Hassan Shaba. "Gaddafi men are still everywhere around here." The green flags of Gaddafi's regime flapped in the wind from most of the town's buildings.

Few civilians could be seen in the town's dusty streets. The roar of Nato warplanes could be heard overhead, but there was no evidence of airstrikes nearby.

"We are waiting to be liberated properly," said Ismail Abdullah, a student. "No one knows what's going on here. No one wants the Gaddafi men around here. We are begging the rebels to stay."

To the east, rebels had reached the town of Nawfaliyah, about 100km from Sirte, but said they were facing only mild resistance from Gaddafi forces.

"There are some light clashes," said Senussi Mabrook, a rebel fighter. "They (Gaddafi soldiers) don't have ammunition. Their morale is low.

"God willing, the people of Sirte will liberate the city. We will wait two, three or four days. There is no problem. We have Nato up above."

NTC spokesman Shamsiddin Abdulmolah said most people in Sirte were against Gaddafi. "But it's the minority of Gaddafi loyalists who have the weapons," he said. "They're using all kinds of scare tactics but it's a losing strategy."

Abdulmolah said NTC forces had heard that about 45 Gaddafi soldiers and officers had been executed in Sirte after refusing to fight for what they saw as a lost cause. There was no independent confirmation.

Some fighters were moving to cut a road linking Sirte with the desert town of Sabha, another Gaddafi stronghold about 500km to the southwest, Zawawi said.

Nato aircraft have been bombing military positions and ammunition dumps of pro-Gaddafi forces in Sirte.

Human rights groups say both sides have executed prisoners, but Droy said the message to Gaddafi loyalists was that there would be no reprisal killings when Sirte is taken.

"We have our people in Sirte ready to take control. They are ready to put these people safely in jail where they will wait for a trial," Droy said.

Anti-Gaddafi forces say time is on their side and there is no deadline for the defenders to give up, adding that the city is without power and is running short of food and medicine.

"Day by day, the people who are trying to get the Gaddafi soldiers to put down their guns are getting stronger and stronger," said Droy.

Abdulmolah said: "It's a waiting game in favour of the liberating forces." — Reuters

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