

Flamboyant Gaddafi no stranger to bloodshed
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MUAMMAR Gaddafi appealed on Sunday night for his people to "save Tripoli" from a rebel offensive, but his four-decade-old rule appeared doomed.

While leaders of neighbouring Arab states folded quickly in the face of popular uprisings, Gaddafi had put up a bloody fight, taking on Nato as well as local insurgents who quickly seized half the country.

With his bedouin tents and heavily-armed female bodyguards, along with a readiness to execute his opponents and turn his tanks on his opponents, Gaddafi cut an eccentric and bloody figure as Libya's leader for more than 40 years.

For most of that time he held a prominent position in the West's international rogues' gallery, while maintaining tight control at home by eliminating dissidents and refusing to anoint a successor.

Gaddafi effected a successful rapprochement with the West by renouncing his weapons of mass destruction programme in return for an end to sanctions but he could not avoid the tide of revolution sweeping through the Arab world.

The Libyan leader, his son and his spy chief are wanted for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for planning the violent suppression of the uprising.

As his oil-producing North African desert nation descended into civil war, Gaddafi's military responded with the deadly force that he had never been afraid to use, despite the showman image that captivated many.

When the insurgency began in mid-February, protesters were gunned down in their hundreds in Benghazi and other cities.

'Mad dog'

International pressure grew and Gaddafi found himself facing Nato bombing raids that knocked out his tanks and guns and also targeted his own headquarters in Tripoli. One raid killed his youngest son and three grandchildren.

It was not the first time that the West had killed a Gaddafi family member.

US President Ronald Reagan called Gaddafi a "mad dog" and sent warplanes to bomb his Bab al-Aziziyah compound in 1986. One of the 60 people killed was Gaddafi's adopted daughter.

Gaddafi used the Tripoli building bombed in the raid, left unrepaired for 25 years, to deliver one of his first defiant speeches of the war, standing beside a memorial in the shape of a giant metal fist crushing an American warplane.

In televised addresses in response to the rebellion in the east, Gaddafi blamed the unrest on rats and mercenaries and said they were brainwashed by Osama bin Laden and under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs used to spike their coffee.

There was repeated speculation that Gaddafi has either been killed or wounded in NATO air raids, but he made carefully choreographed television appearances in response to the rumours.

In May, Gaddafi taunted Nato, saying its bombers could not find him.

"I am telling the coward crusaders that I am at a place you cannot reach and kill me," he said in an audio recording broadcast on al-Jamahiriya television. His later speeches were also delivered as audio recordings, presumably to conceal his whereabouts.

Earlier, rumours that he had fled to Venezuela proved wide of the mark, and he has maintained that he has no intention of going anywhere.

'I will die here'

"I am not going to leave this land, I will die here as a martyr ... I shall remain here defiant," he said. Gaddafi insists that rebels are foreign forces and agents of al Qaeda.

One of the world's longest serving national leaders, Gaddafi has no official government function and is known as the "Brother Leader and Guide of the Revolution".

His love of grand gestures has been on display on foreign visits when he slept in a bedouin tent guarded by dozens of female bodyguards.

In Italy last year, Gaddafi's invitation to hundreds of young women to convert to Islam overshadowed the visit, which was intended to cement growing ties between Tripoli and Rome.

US diplomatic cables released by the WikiLeaks website shed further light on the Libyan leader's tastes.

One cable posted by The New York Times describes Gaddafi's insistence on staying on the ground floor when he visited New York for a 2009 meeting at the United Nations and his reported refusal or inability to climb more than 35 steps.

Gaddafi was also said to rely heavily on his staff of four Ukrainian nurses, including one woman described as a "voluptuous blonde". The cable speculated about a romantic relationship, but the nurse, Galyna Kolonytska, 38, fled Libya after the fighting started.

In tandem with his eccentricity, Gaddafi had a charisma which won him support among many ordinary Libyans. His readiness to take on Western powers and Israel, both with rhetoric and action, earned him a certain cachet with some in other Arab states who felt their own leaders were too supine.

Gaddafi was born in 1942, the son of a bedouin herdsman, in a tent near Sirte on the Mediterranean coast. He abandoned a geography course at university for a military career that included a short spell at a British army signals school.

Colonel Gaddafi took power in a bloodless military coup in 1969 when he toppled King

Idriss, and in the 1970s he formulated his "Third Universal Theory", a middle road between communism and capitalism, as laid out in his "Green Book".

Oil wells and desert

Gaddafi oversaw the rapid development of Libya, previously known for little more than oil wells and deserts where huge tank battles took place in World War Two. The economy is now paying the price of war and sanctions.

One of his first tasks on taking power was to build up the armed forces, but he also spent billions of dollars of oil income on improving living standards, making him popular with the low-paid.

Gaddafi poured money into giant projects such as a steel plant in the town of Misrata – the scene of bitter fighting – and the Great Man-Made River, a scheme to pipe water from desert wells to coastal communities.

Before the war broke out, he had already made extensive use of harsh tactics against dissidents, including Islamists, and used "purification committees" of army and police officers, joined by loyal students, to keep control.

Gaddafi embraced the pan-Arabism of the late Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and tried without success to merge Libya, Egypt and Syria into a federation. A similar attempt to join Libya and Tunisia ended in acrimony.

In 1977 he changed the country's name to the Great Socialist Popular Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (State of the Masses) and allowed people to air their views at people's congresses.

However, for much of his rule he has been shunned by the West, which accused him of links to terrorism and revolutionary movements.

He was particularly reviled after the 1988 Pan Am airliner bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, by Libyan agents in which 270 people were killed.

UN sanctions imposed in 1992 to pressure Tripoli to hand over two Libyan suspects, crippled the economy, dampened Gaddafi's revolutionary spirit and took the sting out of his anti-capitalist, anti-Western rhetoric.

Gaddafi abandoned his programme of prohibited weapons in 2003 to return Libya into international mainstream politics.

In September 2004, U.S. President George W. Bush formally ended a US trade embargo as a result of Gaddafi's scrapping of the arms programme and taking responsibility for Lockerbie.

However, the return to Libya last year of the convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi, released from a Scottish jail on health grounds, angered Washington. – Reuters

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