

Gaddafi is dead
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SIRTE: Muammar Gaddafi is dead, Libya's new leaders said, killed by fighters who overran his hometown and final bastion yesterday. His bloodied body was stripped and displayed around the world on a cellphone video. Senior officials in the interim government, which ended his 42-year rule two months ago but had laboured to subdue thousands of diehard loyalists, said his death would allow a declaration of "liberation" after eight months of bloodshed.

"We confirm that all the evils, plus Gaddafi, have vanished from this beloved country," Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril said in Tripoli as the body was delivered, as a prize of war, to Misrata, the city whose siege and suffering at the hands of Gaddafi's forces made it a symbol of the rebel cause.

"It's time to start a new Libya, a united Libya," Jibril added. "One people, one future." A formal declaration of liberation, that would set the clock ticking on a timeline to elections, would be made by today, he said later.

Western leaders, who had held off cautiously from comment until Jibril spoke, echoed his sentiments now that Gaddafi, a self-styled "king of kings" in Africa whom they had lately courted after decades of enmity, was dead at 69.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, who with French President Nicolas Sarkozy was an early sponsor of February's revolt in Benghazi, said: "People in Libya today have an even greater chance after this news of building themselves a strong and democratic future." The old national flag, resurrected by rebels who forced Gaddafi from Tripoli in August, filled streets and squares as crowds whooped for joy and fired in the air.

In Gaddafi's hometown here, fighters danced, brandishing a golden pistol they said they had taken from Gaddafi. Accounts were hazy of his final hours, which also appeared to have cost the lives of senior aides. But top officials of the National Transitional Council, including Abdel Majid Mlegta, said he had died of wounds sustained in clashes.

One possible description, pieced together from various sources, suggests that Gaddafi may have tried to break out of his final redoubt at dawn in a convoy of vehicles after weeks of dogged resistance.

But he was stopped by a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation airstrike and captured, possibly three or four hours later, after gun battles with NTC fighters who found him hiding in a drainage culvert.

Nato said its warplanes fired on a convoy near here about 8.30am (2.30pm in Malaysia), striking two military vehicles, but could not confirm that Gaddafi had been a passenger.

Accounts from his enemies suggested his capture, and death soon after from wounds, may have taken place around noon. One of Gaddafi's sons, heir-apparent Saif al-Islam, was at large, they believed.

Mlegta said Saif was surrounded after also trying to flee the city. Another son, Mo'tassim, whose arrest was announced earlier in the day, had been killed resisting his captors, he added.

Mlegta said Gaddafi had been wounded in both legs early in the morning as he tried to flee in the convoy that Nato warplanes attacked.

"He was also hit in the head." There was no shortage of NTC fighters here claiming to have seen him die, though many accounts were conflicting.

Libyan television carried a video of two drainage pipes, about a metre across, where it said fighters had cornered a man who long inspired fear and admiration around the world.

After February's uprising in the long discontented east of the country around Benghazi — inspired by the Arab Spring movements that overthrew the leaders of neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt — the revolt against Gaddafi ground slowly across the country before a dramatic turn saw Tripoli fall in August.

The NTC now faces the challenge of turning oil wealth once monopolised by Gaddafi and his clan into a democracy that can heal an array of tribal, ethnic and regional divisions that he had exploited.

The two months since the fall of Tripoli have tested the nerves of the motley alliance of anti-Gaddafi forces and their Western and Arab backers, who had begun to question the ability of NTC forces to root out Gaddafi loyalists here and in other towns.

Gaddafi, wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of ordering the killing of civilians, was toppled by rebel forces on Aug 23, a week short of the 42nd anniversary of the military coup that brought him to power in 1969.

NTC fighters hoisted the red, black and green national flag above a large building in the centre of a newly captured neighbourhood, here and celebratory gunfire broke out among their relieved comrades. Hundreds of NTC troops had surrounded the Mediterranean coastal town for weeks in a struggle that killed and wounded scores of the besiegers and an unknown number of defenders.

The death of Gaddafi is a setback to campaigners seeking the full truth about the 1988 bombing over Lockerbie in Scotland of Pan Am flight 103, which claimed 270 lives, mainly Americans, and for which one of Gaddafi's agents was convicted. — Reuters

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