

LIBYA PROTESTS

Isolated Gaddafi losing grip as pressure mounts

AGENCIES, Tripoli, Tobruk

Pressure has mounted on isolated Libyan ruler Col Muammar Gaddafi after a chorus of international condemnation and resignations by top officials.

The man considered the colonel's number two, Interior Minister Abdel Fattah Younes al-Abidi, is among senior figures who have joined the opposition. The UN Security Council demanded an end to the violence on Tuesday, while the Arab League suspended Libya.

Protesters greeted an angry speech by the veteran leader with defiance.

Meanwhile, opponents of Gaddafi appeared firmly in control of Libya's coastal east, from the Egyptian border through to the cities of Tobruk and Benghazi, with government soldiers switching sides to join the uprising.

Soldiers in the east were declaring their support for the uprising, the residents said, but the regime asserted it was still in control via a text message sent on the Libyan national mobile telephone network.

The BBC's Jon Leyne, in eastern Libya, says people there believe the government now controls just a few pockets of territory including parts of the capital Tripoli and the southern town of Sabha.

After a week of upheaval, protesters

backed by defecting army units are thought to have almost the entire eastern half of Libya under their control.

At least 300 people have died in the uprising, although Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini told reporters in Rome a death toll of 1,000 was more 'credible'.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy meanwhile called for the European Union to adopt 'swift and concrete sanctions' and to suspend ties with Libya.

He spoke as France's Total became the latest oil company to announce that it was suspending its operations in the North African nation.

The Associated Press news agency reports that Gaddafi supporters and hired foreign mercenaries opened fire on the streets of Tripoli yesterday.

There are also unconfirmed reports that protesters have seized control of the north-western city of Misurata, and have been raising pre-Gaddafi flags in celebration.

The UN Security Council's statement in New York late on Tuesday came amid reports that foreign mercenaries have been attacking civilians and warplanes bombing protesters.

Its 15 members said the Libyan government should "address the legitimate demands of the population", act with restraint, and respect human rights.

Meanwhile, Interior Minister Mr al-

Abidi - head of the powerful Thunderbolt commando brigade - read a resignation statement from his desk, urging the army to support the people and their 'legitimate demands'.

The Libyan ambassador to Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei became the latest figure to quit on Wednesday, in protest at the crack-down on demonstrators in his country.

A senior aide to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, a son of the Libyan leader, has also quit, Reuters news agency reports.

A number of senior Libyan officials, including ministers, diplomats and military officers, have swung their support behind the protesters.

Col Gaddafi's speech on Tuesday, when he referred to the protesters as rats and cockroaches, has been greeted with a mixture of anger and mockery.

During the rambling 75-minute address on state TV, Col Gaddafi - who has ruled the country since taking power in a 1969 military coup - vowed to crush the revolt and die as a martyr.

In the eastern opposition strongholds of Benghazi, Libya's second city, and Tobruk, demonstrators poured scorn on the veteran ruler.

In Tripoli, bursts of gunfire and blaring of car horns rang out, although it is not clear if protesters or Gaddafi loyalists were responsible.



PHOTO : AFP

This overhauled view shows badly damaged buildings in the centre of the city after a 6.3 earthquake hit the city of Christchurch on February 22, 2011. Rescuers dug frantically for bodies as people trapped after the major earthquake caused 'multiple' deaths in New Zealand's second city of Christchurch, crushing buildings and vehicles. 75 people have been declared dead and hundreds missing as the death tally are feared to be around 400.

NEWS IN brief

UN rights council to hold special session on Libya

AFP, Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council will hold a special session tomorrow to discuss the violence in Libya, a UN official said yesterday, amid a global outcry and moves to set up a probe into suspected crimes against humanity.

"We received the request for a special session this morning, filed by the European Union," Alessandro Marra, an official at the UN human rights office told AFP.

World's coral reefs could be gone by 2050, study warns

AFP, Washington

The world's coral reefs could be wiped out by 2050 unless urgent action is taken to stop threats posed to the "rainforests of the sea" by everything from over-fishing to global warming, a report warned yesterday.

Warmer seas caused by global warming; ocean acidification blamed on carbon dioxide pollution; shipping, overfishing, coastal development and agricultural runoff all pose a threat to coral reefs, which hundreds of millions of people depend on for

'MP land' drive

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the drive seized five earth-moving equipment which were being used to fill up a portion of the Buriganga and lowland without any environmental clearance. The Daily Star covered the event under the headline 'Aati canal goes, river on the way'.

Aslam landed at the environment office around 12:30pm and sent the alarm bells ringing, threatening and shouting over the drive at people, sources said. But the lawmaker told The Daily Star it was a mere discussion, adding that he went there to show his land ownership documents.

According to the law, even private land owners have to get permission from the Department of Environment and site clearance before filling up any wetland. Violating that rule is a punishable offence.

The site in question had a signboard saying, "Proposed: Fuel Preservation Centre Rented by Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (government approved)".

The report mentions that the Department of Environment already filed a case in connection with violating the Environment Preservation Act (amendment), 2010.

Munir Chowdhury, the director of Monitoring and Enforcement wing of the Department of Environment, yesterday said they found a portion of river was being filled up with the help of those equipment.

They did not have any clearance from the Department of Environment. "So we seized those bulldozers as evidence," he added.

Lawmaker Aslamul Haque was not available for comments Tuesday evening.

When asked about it, Aslamul yesterday told The Daily Star that he is a 'man of the law and in favour of saving the rivers'. He just filled up his own legal land, not any river.

About permission from the Department of Environment, he said, "We have hired a logistic company to get all these permissions from the government. So the process is on for getting permission for the power plant project."

"I went to the Department of Environment office to talk about it," he said again.

Arriving at the office, Aslamul wanted to meet the director who conducted the drive on his land and the director general.

But none of them were available at the office then, an official who was present during the lawmaker's visit said.

Later, he went to the office of director technical of the environment department and asked for the keys to the five excavators and bulldozers which were seized by the officials during the drive Tuesday.

"But that particular director was absent too. The lawmaker then went to the office of director (technical) Mohammed Shajahan and did some shouting there," said an official of the DoE requesting anonymity.

"We were all terrified as the lawmaker shouted at us," he said.

The lawmaker, however, insisted that he went there only to show his legal documents.

Foreigners, Libyans flee in 'biblical proportions'

AGENCIES, Ankara, Tobruk

Foreigners and migrants fled the turmoil in Libya by the thousands yesterday, climbing aboard ships, ferries and planes or fleeing in overloaded vans to the country's borders with Egypt and Tunisia.

Tripoli's airport was overwhelmed with stranded people seeking a way out.

"The airport was mobbed, you wouldn't believe the number of people," said Kathleen Burnett, of Baltimore, Ohio, as she stepped off an Austrian Airlines flight from Tripoli to Vienna on Tuesday. "It was total chaos."

Meanwhile, The Red Crescent said yesterday it feared a 'catastrophic' exodus of Libyans into Tunisia, saying more than 5,700 Tunisians and Libyans had fled across the border over the past two days.

"Some 5,700 Tunisians and Libyans fleeing Libya crossed the border between the two countries at Ras Jedir Monday and Tuesday. They keep arriving," Hadi Nadri, a Red Crescent official, told AFP.

"After what Gaddafi said yesterday, we fear a massive, catastrophic exodus," he added. "We expect thousands of Libyan refugees to pour into Tunisia. We are bracing for the worst."

Rome fears an immigrant exodus of 'biblical proportions' if Gaddafi is ousted, predicting up to 300,000 Libyans could try to flee their country, Italian Foreign Minister told the daily Corriere della Sera.

Several countries -- including Russia,

Germany, France, Bulgaria, China and Ukraine started evacuation of their citizens from Libya and sending more carriers for rapid evacuation. Several countries sent more planes in to help their citizens leave the increasingly unstable situation.

Turkey was cranking up the largest evacuation in its history, seeking to protect some 25,000 citizens and more than 200 Turkish companies involved in construction projects in Libya worth.

Two Turkish commercial ships left the eastern Libyan port of Benghazi yesterday escorted by a navy frigate. Turkey has also sent two more commercial ships to Libya.

China was also gearing up for a massive evacuation by evacuating 30,000 or more Chinese in Libya.

The International Organisation for Migration said several Asian, African and one European government requested its help to evacuate their citizens.

Migrants were pouring into Libya's land borders with Egypt and Tunisia and the group was trying to help find accommodation for those already at the border, said Jemini Pandya, a spokeswoman for the Geneva-based organisation.

Pandya said it was difficult to estimate how many migrants, many of them undocumented, would flee Libya, but "it will be thousands."

British Airways and Emirates, the Middle East's largest airline, cancelled flights to Tripoli on Tuesday.

Jordanians plan 'day of anger' to speed reforms

AFP, Amman

Jordan's powerful Islamist opposition said it plans to stage a "day of anger" demonstration with other parties tomorrow (Friday) to demand reforms, in what they hope will be the largest protest since January.

"Around 10,000 members of the Islamist movement as well as supporters of 19 political parties will take part in the march to call for reforms," Zaki Bani Rshaid of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) executive committee said yesterday.

"Demonstrations will also take place in other governorates," said Bani Rshaid, whose party is the political arm of the country's Muslim Brotherhood.

"We have given the government time to translate its reform plan into action, but we felt its lax attitude to taking practical steps and that it is stalling for time," he told AFP.

NEW ZEALAND EARTHQUAKE

Death toll rises to 75

BBC ONLINE

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key has declared a national state of emergency as the death toll from Tuesday's earthquake in Christchurch rose to 75.

Police have said there is "incredible carnage right throughout the city", with "bodies littering the streets". More than 300 people are still missing. Forty-eight were pulled out from collapsed buildings alive overnight.

The search has now been abandoned at one office block, but elsewhere a woman was rescued after more than 24 hours.

"The situation is that we don't believe this site is now survivable," said police area commander Inspector Dave Lawry near the remains of the Canterbury Television building. "It was a hard choice and my heart goes out to all the families."

He said rescuers now needed to concentrate their resources elsewhere in areas where survivors were more likely to be found.

The building housed a language school and Lawry said some foreign students would be among the dead there.

At the Pyne Gould Guinness building, office worker Ann Bodkin was pulled out alive yesterday afternoon, after being trapped for more than 24 hours, and was reunited with her waiting husband.

The authorities have imposed a night-time curfew in the worst-affected areas of the city.

The earthquake struck at a shallow depth of 5km on Tuesday lunchtime, when the South Island city was at its busiest.

It was Christchurch's second major tremor in five months, and New Zealand's deadliest natural disaster in 80 years.

Prime Minister John Key, who grew up in Christchurch, declared a national state of emergency after a cabinet meeting in the capital, Wellington. He said it would allow the greatest possible co-ordination of local, national, and international resources to work on rescue and recovery efforts.

Clashes erupt in Greece strike

BBC ONLINE

Police in Athens have fired tear gas to disperse demonstrators hurling petrol bombs and stones as a 24-hour general strike grips Greece.

The violence erupted during a rally by more than 30,000 angry workers near the Greek parliament. They object to the government's far-reaching budget cuts.

The strike paralysed public transport. More than 100 flights were cancelled.

Manyschoolsareclosedand hospitals have reduced services. Small businesses have joined in, closing many shops.

It is Greece's first major labour protest this year, as the government sticks to austerity cuts demanded under the terms of the country's international bail-out.

The Socialist government of Prime Minister George Papandreu is cutting spending and raising taxes to reduce its debt mountain.

In May last year Greece secured a 110bn-euro (£93bn; \$150bn) bail-out from the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

A series of general strikes took place last year as the government embarked on an economic austerity programme that will last several years.

Yemeni protesters defiant after attack Bahrain protesters vow not to budge

AFP, Sanaa, Manama

Thousands of Yemeni anti-regime demonstrators chanted defiantly yesterday after government loyalists shot two of them dead, while eight ruling party MPs resigned over the suppression of protesters.

"Enough! Enough! The criminal attacks during the night!", chanted the mostly young demonstrators camped at Sanaa University in the capital, after gunmen attacked them during the night, killing two of them and wounding 23, according to witnesses and medics.

"I presented my resignation with seven others to protest the methods used by the General People's Congress to quell protests in the country," MP Abdu Bishr said, after two others had done so earlier in the week.

He added that "59 over party members are getting together to present a collective resignation."

President Ali Abdullah Saleh's GPC said it had indefinitely postponed a counter-demonstration announced for yesterday due to the deaths of the protesters, a source close to the party said.

The attack on the rally took place near midnight and followed other clashes earlier on Tuesday between the two sides.

Witnesses said government loyalists opened fire on the students, killing two of them and wounding 23 before police arrived and returned fire, sending the attackers fleeing.

Meanwhile, Bahrain protesters vowed yesterday not to budge from Pearl Square, epicentre of anti-regime demonstrations, despite the release of leading Shiite opposition activists and renewed calls by the king for talks.

"Even if they put the gun in my mouth and order me to leave, I will not," said Sabah Abadi, a retired municipal employee who sat in a tent with his son and friends in the square.

One day after a massive protest clogged the main roads of Manama, Shiite demonstrators again crowded into Pearl Square yesterday, chanting: "We are brothers, Sunnis and Shiites. We shall not abandon this country."

Foreign mercenaries in the Middle East: A brief history

TIME ONLINE

While the protests convulsing Bahrain and Libya this past week occurred in vastly different contexts -- and will likely produce very different results -- both were met with conspicuously swift crackdowns. And in both cases, reports suggest the Libyan and Bahraini regimes deployed foreign fighters and mercenaries against their own citizens, lethal clashes that left scores wounded and many dead.

Though difficult to substantiate in the current chaos, reports from eastern Libya, in particular from the city of Benghazi, claim that snipers and militiamen from sub-Saharan Africa gunned down residents on the streets. The Dubai-based al-Arabiya network and Qatar-based Aljazeera say some of the guerrillas were Francophone mercenaries recruited by one of the sons of Gaddafi while some others were hired from Guinea and Nigeria, offering them \$2,000 per day to crack down on the Libyan uprising.

The popular outrage surrounding the use of these foreign soldiers in the crackdowns isn't surprising, but it's only in the past century that the armies of most of the world's nation-states have actually reflected the demographics of their countries. For centuries before, most militaries contained whole regiments of mercenaries and roving soldiers of fortune and were often staffed by officers from foreign lands. The term freelance -- now a feature of journalistic lingo -- had been a military term.

Foreign warriors were valued by monarchs wary of their own restive populations and the rivalries and jealousies of

local nobles. The great empires of the Middle East all boasted a rank of soldiers drawn from abroad. The Ottomans had the janissaries, mostly young Christians from the Caucasus and the Balkans, who converted to Islam and were reared from an early age to be the Sultan's elite household troops. Elsewhere, the Mamluks, slave warriors from Africa to Central Asia forced into service by Arab potentates.

The most famous troupe of foreign fighters to take up arms in the Middle East was the French Foreign Legion, formed in the 19th century to be the vanguard of France's imperial adventures overseas. Though regarded as romantic heroes, in reality, most of the legionnaires had criminal records and bore a fearsome reputation for violence.

Meanwhile, a handful of British mercenaries in the Middle East left a far more indelible legacy, with none of the glory attached to the French Foreign Legion. The oil-rich Gulf states eagerly snapped up former British soldiers to help defend their kingdoms from the advances of socialists and other insurgents, often with London's tacit backing if not direct consent.

Many are reportedly also Pakistanis from the troubled desert region of Baluchistan, happy to sign up with the promise of greater pay. In an earlier era, Pakistani troops trained the armies of a number of Arab states -- in the 1960s, Pakistanis were the first to serve as pilots in the Royal Saudi Air Force.

But, especially in the Gulf, these mercenaries played a vital role in setting up the often repressive security states that now exist.