

## Libyan rebels recapture strategic eastern town

REUTERS, Ajdabiyah

Libyan rebels backed by allied air strikes recaptured the strategic eastern town of Ajdabiyah yesterday, pushing out Muammar Gaddafi's forces.

Rebel fighters danced on tanks, waved flags and fired in the air by buildings riddled with bullet holes after an all-night battle that suggested the tide is turning against Gaddafi's forces in the east.

A Reuters correspondent saw half a dozen wrecked tanks near the eastern entrance to the town and the ground strewn with empty shell casings. There were also signs of heavy fighting at the western gate, the last part of the town taken from government troops.

"Everything was destroyed last night by our forces," said rebel fighter Sarhag Agouri. Witnesses and rebel fighters said the whole town was in rebel hands by late morning.

Capturing Ajdabiyah is a big morale boost for the rebels after two weeks spent on the back foot.

Gaddafi's better-armed forces halted an early rebel advance near the major oil export terminal of Ras Lanuf and pushed them back to their stronghold of Benghazi until Western powers struck Gaddafi's positions from the sea and air.

Air strikes on Ajdabiyah on Friday afternoon seem to have been decisive.

The African Union said it was planning to facilitate talks to help end the war, but Nato said its operation could last three months, and France said the conflict would not end soon.

In Washington, a US military spokeswoman said the coalition fired 16 Tomahawk cruise missiles and flew 153 air sorties in the past 24 hours attacking Gaddafi's artillery, mechanized forces and command and control infrastructure.

Western governments hope the raids, launched a week ago with the aim of protecting civilians, will shift the balance of power in favour of the Arab world's most violent popular revolt.

In Tripoli, explosions were heard early yesterday, signalling possible new

strikes by warplanes or missiles.

Libyan state television was broadcasting occasional, brief news reports of Western air strikes. Mostly it showed footage -- some of it grainy images years old -- of cheering crowds waving green flags and carrying portraits of Gaddafi.

Neither Gaddafi nor his sons have been shown on state television since the Libyan leader made a speech from his Tripoli compound on Wednesday. State TV said the "brother leader" had promoted all members of his armed forces and police "for their heroic and courageous fight against the crusader, colonialist assault."

The United States said Gaddafi's ability to command and sustain his forces was diminishing.

Officials and rebels said aid organisations were able to deliver some supplies to the western city of Misrata but were concerned because of government snipers in the city centre.

France said the mission could go on for weeks.

## Yemen 'close to transition of power deal'

REUTERS, Sanaa

A deal on a peaceful transition of power in Yemen could come as early yesterday and would be based on an offer by President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down by year-end, Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi said.

But an opposition leader cast doubt on prospects for a swift deal, a day after a diplomat in Sanaa cautioned it was too soon to discuss an outcome, saying it could still "go either way."

Yemen, a poor and tribally divided country that has become a base for al Qaeda next to the world's top oil producer Saudi Arabia, has been in turmoil since January when the example of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions set off popular demonstrations to end Saleh's 32-year authoritarian rule.

"I hope it will be today, before tomorrow," Qirbi, who is serving as caretaker foreign minister, told Reuters in an interview, adding that the time frame of a transfer of power by Saleh could be negotiated.

Saleh, who oversaw the 1990 unification of north and south Yemen and emerged victorious from a civil war four years later, told tribes in Sanaa Saturday that he would "work to avoid bloodshed using all possible means."

He said Friday he was ready to relinquish power to forestall more bloodshed but only to what he called "safe hands" after weeks of street demonstrations demanding his departure.



Anti-government protesters demonstrate outside Sanaa University yesterday demanding the ouster of Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh.



Participants hold pictures of babies during a pro-life rally yesterday, in downtown Bucharest. Around 200 people took part in the protest calling "for the protection of the gift of life and traditional family".

## Rescuers struggle to reach Myanmar quake areas

AFP, Tachileik

Rescuers battled yesterday to reach thousands of survivors in remote areas of Myanmar after an earthquake tore up roads and reduced hundreds of homes to rubble, leaving 75 people dead.

The powerful 6.8 magnitude quake struck in the east of the country near the borders with Thailand and Laos late on Thursday and was felt as far away as the Vietnamese capital Hanoi.

The towns of Tarlay, Mong Lin and Tachileik in Myanmar's Shan state appeared to have been most severely affected by the quake, which flattened hundreds of houses and toppled monasteries and government buildings.

Rare images from the area on Thai television and exiled media showed roads riven with huge cracks, bridges destroyed and homes reduced to piles of timber.

Strong aftershocks continued into yesterday.

A motorcycle taxi driver in Tachileik told AFP that things were "calm" in the town. "We were frightened in the beginning, but now we are trying to get back to normal," he said.

The charity World Vision said around 15,000 people could have been affected in the worst-hit areas.

It is sending in first aid kits and tarpaulins to give emergency shelter for up to 2,500 families.

"This is an immediate concern as even last night there was rain," said Chris Herink, Myanmar country director in Yangon.

He told AFP that rescuers were transporting supplies along the road into Tarlay, but a broken bridge was disrupting access to Tachileik, although the government was working to repair the structure.

A Myanmar official said there had been no official increase in the toll from Friday's figure of 74. One woman was also killed in Thailand.

"There might be some places we still cannot reach because of the communication and transportation problems. The death toll could rise," the official added.

The region affected was already difficult to reach before the quake, access to the area by foreigners is restricted and the military dominated government tends to keep a tight grip on information.

## MUSHARRAF'S ARREST Pakistan to seek Interpol help

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan will ask Interpol to circulate a global arrest warrant for former president Pervez Musharraf over the murder of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, a prosecutor said yesterday.

A Pakistani court last week gave prosecutors until April 2 to serve a warrant granted in February on Musharraf, who was president when Bhutto was killed in December 2007 in a gun and suicide bomb attack in Rawalpindi.

Musharraf, who lives in self-imposed exile in London, is accused of failing to provide her with adequate security.

"We presented three letters in the court which have been sent to the British government for the execution of the warrants," prosecutor Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali told AFP.

## India's tiger population 'on the rise'



AFP, New Delhi

India's tiger population has increased for the first time in decades, a newspaper said yesterday, citing a national tiger census report slated to be released next week.

According to the 2009-10 tiger census report, the number of tigers in India has jumped to 1,510-1,550 from 1,411 in 2004-05, The Indian Express newspaper said.

The newspaper report came ahead of an international tiger conservation conference due to open on Monday in the Indian capital New Delhi.

India is home to more than half of the world's rapidly dwindling wild tiger population, but its conservation programme, said by the government to be the world's most comprehensive, has been struggling to halt the big cat's decline.

Tiger conservationists welcomed the news and said that the population increase was due to the authorities surveying more areas to conduct the census and creating more tiger reserves.

Tito Joseph, programme director at the Wildlife Protection Society of India, said "the latest census included some of the areas they left out last time because of problems accessing the terrain, like the Sunderbans" which is home to hundreds of tigers.

The Sunderbans mangrove forest straddles the borders of India's West Bengal state and Bangladesh and lies on the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta.

## Canada dissolves parliament

AFP, Ottawa

Canada's governor general dissolved parliament yesterday after a vote of no-confidence in Tory Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government, setting up a fourth election in seven years.

From the steps of the official residence of Queen Elizabeth II's representative in Canada, Harper announced the official launch of the campaign, which culminates in elections on May 2.

Wasting no time in wooing votes, he immediately contrasted his Conservatives' economic recovery plan with the prospects of opposition parties forming a leftist coalition.

"I have met with Governor General David Johnston and he has agreed to dissolve Parliament," Harper said.

"On May 2 we will choose between a stable national government or a reckless coalition, between a low-tax plan for jobs and growth or a high-tax agenda that will

stall our recovery," he said.

In an unprecedented move, the main opposition Liberals backed by two other opposition parties on Friday had voted no confidence in Harper's minority government and declared it in contempt of parliament.

The vote sprang from a row over Harper's budget plans.

The motion passed by just 11 votes -- 156 in favour to 145 against. It was the first time a Canadian government had been found in contempt of parliament.

Since 2006, Harper has led back-to-back minority governments always teetering on the brink of collapse, its relations with opposition parties becoming increasingly acrimonious recently.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff accused the government of having "stonewalled" parliament over the past four months on details of its core spending priorities, and of having broken election laws.

## BBC Caribbean Service closed

BBC ONLINE

The BBC Caribbean Service has made its final broadcast, ending seven decades of programming for the region.

The service is being shut as part of budget cuts announced by the BBC World Service in January.

BBC managers say they have had to make tough choices because of a 16 percent cut in UK government funding.

But one critic called it a short-sighted decision, showing the BBC did not understand the complexities of the region.

The Macedonian, Albanian, Serbian and Portuguese for Africa services have also been closed in a bid to save \$75m a year.

Seven other language services have moved away from radio to focus on online, mobile and television content.

These include Spanish for Latin America which last month ended its remaining radio broadcasts, on short-wave and intended mainly for Cuba.

This week, members of the Caribbean Service team have each presented a final programme, including material from the BBC archives.

Copies of the sound and text content of the service's radio and online output are being donated to the University of the West Indies, which will have a team working at the BBC's Bush House base to catalogue the material.

E-mails to the Caribbean Service overwhelmingly voiced sadness at its closure.

"It filled a great need for the Caribbean audience to have a view of the world not provided by local radio stations," wrote Jacqueline Sharpe in Trinidad and Tobago.

Regional media commentators have said the demise of the BBC Caribbean Service should spur renewed efforts to create a pan-Caribbean news network.

"Since the announcement, we have come to truly know the important role we have been playing across

the Caribbean. We're going out on a high - what more can any broadcaster ask for?" said Caribbean Service head Debbie Ransome.

The origin of the Caribbean Service was Calling the West Indies, a programme that began in 1939, featuring West Indian troops on active service during World War II reading letters to their families.

From 1943 to 1958, it became Caribbean Voices, highlighting West Indian writers, including VS Naipaul, George Lamming, Andrew Salkey and Samuel Selvon.

In 1949, We See Britain was introduced as part of the programming for the Caribbean under the management of cricketer-turned-producer Ken Ablack.

Over the next three decades, the Caribbean Service nurtured producers and presenters, including Trevor McDonald who became one of the best-known newsreaders on British television.

## Japan quake may impact its time

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan's cataclysmic earthquake and tsunami, which shattered towns and altered its coastline, may also have an impact on time in the country.

Japan may shed its decades-old allergy to daylight savings time in an effort to cut down electricity usage as it struggles to cope with a drop in power output after the strongest earthquake in its history on March 11 triggered a huge tsunami that knocked out a nuclear power plant.

The magnitude 9.0 quake was so powerful it shifted the coastline eight feet to the east around its epicentre in the northeast, the US Geological Survey said.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said on Friday the government would begin estimating the impact and cost of adopting daylight savings and how much support it would get from the private sector.

Japan has had to implement rolling blackouts after the double disaster crippled the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant near the epicentre. The mismatch between supply and demand is set to widen in Japan's summer when electricity usage traditionally peaks with the use of air conditioners.

Clocks are set one hour ahead in daylight savings time to give the day more natural daylight, thus helping to alleviate the need for artificial lighting. The sun appears to rise one hour later in the morning and set an hour later in the evening.

Daylight savings, briefly introduced in Japan during the US occupation after World War Two, has had a handful of advocates, but until now no serious government consideration.



A car hangs from a damaged building in Onagawa town, Miyagi prefecture yesterday. The death toll from a massive earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan's northeast coast topped 10,000, two weeks after the disaster struck, the National Police Agency said.

## US rushes freshwater for Fukushima nuke plant

AFP, Japan

US naval barges loaded with freshwater sped toward Japan's overheated nuclear plant yesterday to help workers struggling to stem a worrying rise in radioactivity and remove dangerously contaminated water from the facility.

Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co is now rushing to inject the reactors with freshwater instead to prevent pipes from clogging and to begin extracting the radioactive water, Hidehiko Nishiyama of Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency said Saturday.

The switch to freshwater was the latest tactic in efforts to gain control of the six-unit nuclear power plant located 140 miles northeast of Tokyo.