

Battle for Misrata turns crucial in Libya

Tribes call for Gaddafi to go, UN to probe human rights abuses

AGENCIES, Benghazi

The battle for the port of Misrata has intensified, underlining its value as a make-or-break city for both the regime and the rebels fighting to oust him.

Meanwhile AUN team has arrived in Tripoli to investigate allegations of human rights violations amid 61 tribes in Libya called Gaddafi to go.

The team was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council following the Libyan government's crackdown on protesters.

The government has said it will cooperate with the inquiry.

The three investigators say they will look at all alleged abuses, including those the government says have been committed by rebels or Nato forces.

There have been reliable reports of enforced disappearances, torture and even killing of protesters, says our correspondent.

Officials on both sides openly admit to the strategic importance of the port, which

serves as a crucial conduit for military and humanitarian aid to the insurgency in Libya's conflict-racked west.

"This port is too much of a headache for Kadhafi, so he wants to destroy it at whatever cost," Colonel Ahmed Omar Bani, military spokesman of the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council, said yesterday.

An official in the capital told AFP, on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, that Misrata was of critical importance to the regime because "simply put: if it fell, the rebels will be at the doors of Tripoli."

If the rebels were to secure Misrata, they would also bypass the need to fight for Gaddafi's hometown of Sirte, halfway between Tripoli and Benghazi and be able to ship in arms and reinforcements under Nato's "indirect protection," he said.

Rebels in Misrata said Tuesday they pushed Gaddafi's troops out after a siege lasting more than seven weeks, but

opposition officials in Benghazi were cautious, suspecting Gaddafi was "regrouping" to "come back in new form."

The insurgents said yesterday Nato air strikes overnight enabled them to force Gaddafi troops 40 kilometres back, putting the Grad rockets of the loyalist forces out of range of the port.

A day earlier, regime forces fired several Grad rockets at the port, killing at least three African refugees and forcing an aid ship to stay out to sea.

Chiefs or representatives of 61 tribes from across the North African country called for an end to Gaddafi's four-decade rule, in a joint statement released by French writer Bernard-Henri Levy.

"Faced with the threats weighing on the unity of our country, faced with the manoeuvres and propaganda of the dictator and his family, we solemnly declare: Nothing will divide us," said the text, drawn up in Benghazi on April 12.

"We share the same ideal of a free, democratic and united Libya," it said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Libyan soldier (R) trains students in the usage of weapons as part of a defence and security workshop at a school in the town of Al-Sbeia, 65kms south of Tripoli yesterday.

Ivory Coast's Gbagbo faces criminal probe

REUTERS, Abidjan

Criminal investigations against former president Laurent Gbagbo, his wife and 100 other people in his close circle have begun, Ivory Coast's new government said yesterday.

Government spokesman Patrick Achi would not give any further details, but Gbagbo and his supporters were accused of wide-scale human rights abuses as they used the military to cling onto power despite losing last November's presidential election to Alassane Ouattara.

Ouattara finally took control of the world's top cocoa grower earlier this month when his forces, backed by French and United Nations soldiers, captured Gbagbo after days of heavy fighting.

"A preliminary investigation has been opened against Laurent Gbagbo, his wife and his entourage," Achi said yesterday.

Fatah, Hamas in unity govt 'understanding'

AFP, Cairo

Rival Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah reached an "understanding" in Cairo yesterday to set up a transitional unity government and hold elections, Egypt's official MENA news agency reported.

The factions "reached a complete understanding after talks on all the points, including the formation of a transitional government with a specific mandate and setting a date for elections," it said.

Meanwhile, Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu said that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas must choose between peace with Israel or with Hamas after rival Palestinian factions announced a reconciliation deal.

Hamas, which seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, was on the verge of agreeing to the same deal in 2010 but backed out, protesting the terms had been revised without its consent.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Islamist movement Hamas of the latest deal.

The agreement calls for presidential and legislative elections to be held within a year, Ahmad told AFP by telephone in the West Bank political capital of Ramallah.

The factions met in Cairo with Egypt's new spy chief Murad Muwafi, whose predecessor Omar Suleiman tried unsuccessfully to bridge a split between the groups that has left Gaza and the West Bank ruled by rival administrations.

Taiwan train accident kills 6, wounds 60

AFP, Taipei

At least six people were killed and 60 others injured yesterday when a train carrying Chinese tourists was hit by a falling tree at a popular mountain spot in central Taiwan, officials said.

The sightseeing train was travelling along Mount Ali when the tree trunk fell, causing four carriages to derail and overturn, said an official at the forestry bureau, which supervises the area.

Twenty-two people were seriously injured, according to the bureau.

The tourism bureau later confirmed that a total of 108 Chinese tourists were on the train, of whom at least four were killed and 34 hurt.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA

Thailand quits peace talks

AFP, Phnom Dong Rak

Hopes of an imminent Thai-Cambodian ceasefire faded yesterday after Bangkok pulled out of talks with its neighbour and deadly border clashes continued for a sixth day.

Cambodia's prime minister called for a truce in the bloodiest fighting between the two countries in decades, which has left 14 people dead and forced tens of thousands of civilians to flee cross-border shelling.

Talks aimed at ending hostilities had been due to take place in Phnom Penh yesterday, but Thai Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan called off the planned meeting with his Cambodian counterpart at the last minute.

Army spokesman Colonel Sunsern Kaewkumnerd said the trip was cancelled after Cambodian media reported that Thailand had admitted defeat in the standoff.

"I will definitely talk with Cambodia but I don't want the public to think the decision to talk is a defeat for Thailand," Prawit told reporters before flying to China for an unre-

lated meeting.

The two nations traded fresh accusations over the breakdown in diplomatic overtures.

"Thailand isn't honest about wanting to reach a permanent ceasefire," Cambodian government spokesman Phay Siphon said.

Eight Cambodian and five Thai troops have died in five days of heavy weapons fire along their shared border, prompting growing diplomatic pressure on the neighbours to end the conflict. Thailand said a civilian had also been killed.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said he was confident that discussions would be held after Prawit returned from China.

"I am ready to talk but I don't understand why they don't stop shelling," he added.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said he wanted the fighting to stop.

"Cambodia is appealing for a ceasefire," the premier said in a speech in the capital Phnom Penh, adding that he was ready to hold talks with his Thai counterpart at a regional summit in Jakarta in early May.

MEXICO MASS GRAVE 96 bodies found

AFP, Durango

The number of bodies found in mass graves near the northern Mexican city of Durango reached 96 after authorities found 21 new remains on Tuesday, state officials said.

"Digging will continue yesterday," read the statement, which added that the unidentified bodies had been buried for at least a year.

The statement did not mention any possible suspects.

The first bodies in the Durango graves were reported found on April 11.

COLOMBIA'S DRUG SUBMARINES

Underwater cocaine traffic

BBC ONLINE

Colombia is the centre of the world's cocaine trade, and traffickers are always seeking new ways to avoid detection - including going underwater.

Nowhere is this more evident than at Colombia's Bahia Malaga naval base, on the Pacific coast.

The main pier is packed with captured fishing trawlers and high-speed cigarette boats once favoured by traffickers.

But there are also a handful of enclosed vessels with pipes and snorkels sticking out at odd angles.

Don't let the unconventional design fool you. These so-called semi-submersibles were built to transport tons of cocaine.

The vessels travel just below the surface of the water - only air and exhaust pipes,

plus a navigational dome, stick out.

They leave tiny wakes and are extremely difficult to spot. They are also low-cost.

Recently, US and Colombian authorities have got better at detecting the semi-subs, and that has led to another technological innovation in cocaine smuggling.

Last year, for the first time, authorities captured a fully submersible submarine.

Then, in February, Colombian authorities discovered a second drug sub under construction.

The sub's tanks that can hold 6,435 litres of fuel.

The submarine also carries ballast and compressed air tanks, bunk beds, a satellite navigation system, and a night-vision camera.

Finally, there's a storage compartment in the bow with space for eight tonnes of cocaine.

Deadliest days for Nato in Afghan campaign

AFP, Kabul

Eight Nato troops and a contractor were killed when an Afghan pilot opened fire yesterday after a row at a Kabul training centre in one of the deadliest such attacks since the US-led invasion in 2001.

The killings appeared to stem from an argument rather than terrorism, but served to highlight the prevailing insecurity in Afghanistan, 10 years after foreign troops ousted the Taliban from power.

They were also likely to raise questions over a massive Nato-led effort to expand and train Afghanistan's military and police so they can take over when foreign combat operations are scheduled to end in 2014.

The Nato-led training mission in Afghanistan confirmed that eight international troops and a contractor died in the shooting but did not reveal the nationality of the troops killed in line with policy.

Afghan defence ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi earlier gave further details of the clash, which is now over.

Prince William
Second-in-line to the British throne
28 years old
June 21, 1982
Born at St Mary's Hospital, London, to Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Brother Harry born in 1984

1995
Enters Eton College, one of Britain's most elite public schools

August 31, 1997
Princess Diana dies in a car accident in Paris after being chased by paparazzi

2000
Takes a year off after completing his A-Levels. Travels to Africa and South America

2001
Begins a degree in art history at St Andrew's University, Scotland, where he meets Kate Middleton

2003
Romantically linked to Kate by the British media

2005
Graduates with a geography degree (having changed courses)

2006
Begins training as an army officer at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst

2009
Completes advanced helicopter course with a view to becoming a military search and rescue pilot

Oct 2010
Proposes to Kate on holiday in Kenya

BRITISH ROYAL WEDDING
ONE MORE DAY TO GO

Royal wedding timetable

Here are the key timings for the day:

- 8:15am:** The 1,900 guests start arriving at the Abbey. Many will in fact be watching on television screens in the abbey due to the layout.
- 10:15am:** Prince William and his younger brother and best man Prince Harry arrive at the Abbey. As a Royal Air Force helicopter pilot William is expected to wear military uniform.
- 10:20am:** Kate's mother Carole and brother James will leave the Goring Hotel, where the bride and her family will have stayed overnight, arriving at the abbey at 10:27am.
- 10:35 am:** British royals begin arriving in strict order of protocol, with Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, and his second wife Camilla getting to the abbey at 10:42am and Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip three minutes later.
- 10:51 am:** Kate and her father Michael leave the Goring Hotel. She will travel in a Rolls Royce limousine.
- 11:00am:** Marriage service begins -- through Kate could be a few minutes late, following a British tradition for brides. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the head of the Church of England, will marry the couple.
- 12:15pm:** The newlyweds travel in a procession to Buckingham Palace, accompanied by soldiers and police on horseback.
- 1:25pm:** The queen and the newlyweds, together with their families, appear on the balcony of Buckingham Palace.
- 1:30 pm:** Flypast by Royal Air Force (RAF) jets.
- Afternoon:** The queen hosts an official wedding lunch for 650 guests at the palace.
- Evening:** Prince Charles hosts dinner-dance at the palace for 300 friends and family.

Kate Middleton
Prince William's bride-to-be
29 years old
Jan 9, 1982
Born in Reading to former airline employees Michael and Carole Middleton. Has two siblings, Pippa and James

1995
Attends the exclusive Marlborough College, where she is known as a sporty, capable pupil.

2000
Spends gap year studying in Florence and volunteering with Raleigh International in Chile

Sept 2001
Begins university degree in art history at St Andrews, Scotland, where she meets Prince William

Dec 2003
Romantically linked to William, with whom she shares a flat

2005
Graduates from St Andrews

2006
Works as an accessory buyer for a clothing chain before joining her parents' successful party supplies business

2007
Splits up with William but they are reconciled a few months later. With no marriage proposal in sight, the British press dubs her "Watty Katy"

Oct 2010
Gets engaged to William during a holiday in Kenya

US, China in human rights talks

AFP, Beijing

US and Chinese officials met in Beijing yesterday for sensitive human rights talks, with the American side expected to press China to ease a major government crackdown on dissent.

Rights groups have urged the US delegation to "give teeth" to the two-day recurring dialogue but activists expected no breakthroughs, with China showing no sign of easing up on its critics.

Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner is heading an inter-agency US delegation for the US-China Human Rights Dialogue, which began yesterday morning.

In unusually direct language, the US State Department last week made clear it would zero in on China's clampdown and the "negative trend of forced disappearances, extralegal detentions, and arrests and convictions."

China has been criticised worldwide for the crackdown.

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