

# Libyan forces renew battle for Gaddafi towns

REUTERS, Bani Walid/sirte

Powerful explosions and machinegun fire shook the besieged Libyan desert town of Bani Walid yesterday as Gaddafi loyalists shelled lines held by interim government attackers.

Ill-organized forces of the ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) have met strong resistance from the defenders of Gaddafi's last bastions in Bani Walid, the coastal city of Sirte and the town of Sabha, deep in the Libyan desert.

Meanwhile, rebels prepared to unveil a new government yesterday even as their troops met fierce resistance from loyalists of fugitive strongman Gaddafi in his last strongholds.

The new regime's military spokesman, Ahmed Bani, said Gaddafi died in his hometown Sirte and the oasis of Bani Walid to its southwest would be defeated in a "matter of days," despite the intensity of the fighting. Last-minute haggling delayed the

announcement of the new government line-up, a National Transitional Council official said.

"We fought all night. We have surrounded the city from all sides with a range of 40 km (25 miles)," anti-Gaddafi commander Absalim Gnuna told Reuters at the northern gate of Bani Walid, as his fighters took cover behind walls and vehicles.

Some fired back at the town using anti-aircraft guns, while Koranic verses blared from a vehicle to boost morale.

"We need to organize ourselves better because now we are not organized," said 50-year-old NTC fighter Jamal al-Gharyani, who served for years in Gaddafi's army before switching sides.

"To liberate Bani Walid, heavy artillery has to go in first followed by infantry -- like everywhere else. Right now it is not exactly chaos, but many of our fighters have no experience so it's not so easy," he sighed.

Shells whistled above anti-Gaddafi positions and exploded across the

desert valley as invisible snipers sprayed bullets from Bani Walid's rooftops and smoke rose above the town.

NTC fighters captured a man hailing from neighbouring Chad in the open desert, accusing him of being a Gaddafi gunman.

Shaking with fear, the man, who gave his name as Mohamed Ezzein, whispered that he had nothing to do with the war.

"I'm just a shepherd. What fighting? What fighting?" he repeated from the back of a pickup truck as anti-Gaddafi fighters pushed him around saying: "Don't lie, don't lie."

NTC forces renewed their push toward Sirte, Gaddafi's home town, after making little headway on Saturday, although they did seize the town of Herawa, 60 km to the east.

A doctor at a field hospital set up in a gas station on the western outskirts of Sirte said 16 anti-Gaddafi fighters and one ambulance driver had died in Saturday's fighting.



PHOTO: AFP

A Libyan teacher waves the flag of Libya's former monarchy, which was adopted by anti-Gaddafi forces as their banner, at the start of the school year in Tripoli yesterday as schools in the Libyan capital are replacing repeated oaths of allegiance to the autocratic Guide, Moamer Gaddafi, with lessons in democracy.

## US drone crashes in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

An unmanned United States drone aircraft crashed in Pakistan's lawless north-western tribal district yesterday after suffering a technical fault, local security officials said.

The drone, the second to crash in Pakistan within the last month, went down in South Waziristan, part of the lawless tribal belt on the Afghan border that Washington calls a global headquarters of al-Qaeda.

"The American drone crashed in Zangara village of South Waziristan, apparently because of some technical faults," a security official in Peshawar, the main town in Pakistan's northwest, told AFP.

Two intelligence officials in Wana, the main town of South Waziristan, confirmed the incident.

## Suu Kyi sees 'positive' change in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

After decades of military rule Aung San Suu Kyi says there are finally signs of political change in Myanmar, but its long-suffering people are still far from real freedom.

In an exclusive interview, the Nobel Peace Prize winner told AFP that the new government appears genuine in its desire for democratic reform, and said an Arab-style uprising is not the answer to the country's problems.

"There have been changes, but I don't think we're all free or completely free yet. There's still quite a way to go, but I think there have been positive developments," the opposition leader said at her party offices in Yangon.

"I've always said I'm a cautious optimist and I remain a cautious optimist. I do believe that the president would like to bring about positive changes but how far he'll be able to achieve what he wants to achieve is a question that we still need to examine."

After almost half a century of iron-



fisted military rule, the junta in March handed power to a new government led by President Thein Sein, one of a clutch of former generals who shed their uniforms to contest last year's election.

The November vote, won by the military's political proxies, was marred by widespread complaints of cheating and the exclusion of Suu Kyi, who was released from seven straight years of house arrest shortly afterwards.

In recent weeks, however, the new

administration has shown signs of reaching out to critics including Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which won a 1990 election but was never allowed to take office.

In a scene few could have imagined until recently, Suu Kyi last month met Thein Sein at his official residence in the capital Naypyidaw, posing for photos under a picture of her late father, the independence hero Aung San.

Although details of the discussion were not revealed, Suu Kyi said the pair managed to find areas of agreement, adding: "We do have many, many things in common in regards to what we would like to see for the country."

The dissident -- who has won international acclaim for her peaceful resistance in the face of oppression, and has been compared to India's independence hero Mahatma Gandhi for her adherence to non-violence -- said she did not want a popular revolt in Myanmar of the kind seen in Libya.

## Syria opposition calls for unity

AFP, Damascus

Opponents of President Bashar al-Assad met in Damascus yesterday, calling for the continuation of popular protests to overthrow the "tyrannical" regime in power in Syria.

"We need to end the tyrannical security regime. We must overthrow the tyranny and the security (agents). We welcome all those who have no blood on their hands," said Hassan Abdel Azim, a member of the opposition National Coordinating Committee for Democratic Change.

The group, which includes opposition parties of various ideologies, including Arab and Kurdish nationalists, Marxists and independent figures such as writer Michel Kilo and economist Aref Dalila, met near the capital on Saturday to discuss how to end the crisis.

Syria has been rocked by protests against Assad that began on March 15 and triggered a brutal crackdown in which the United Nations says 2,600 people have been killed.

The opposition is trying to unite against the regime. Opponents plan to announce the formation of a coalition that includes the Coordinating Committee, liberal parties of the opposition "Damascus Declaration," the

Muslim Brotherhood and independent Islamists.

Several coalitions or councils have also been set up abroad, under the leadership of exiled opposition figures.

"For the overthrow of the tyrannical and corrupt security regime and for democratic change, the peaceful revolution of the Syrian people must continue," said a statement read by Abd-Azizi Khayer of the Coordinating Committee.

It stressed the need for a "peaceful struggle," and denounced "the military-security option chosen by the government to suppress peaceful demonstrators."

To find a way out of the crisis, "we must end the military solution, allow peaceful protests, withdraw the army to the barracks, try those responsible for the massacre of protesters, release all political prisoners and begin reconciliation between the army and the people," the statement added.

Another committee member, Rajaa Nasser, said that "all movements of the Syrian opposition agree on the need for change. The majority reject any military intervention" in Syria, he added.

## NEWS IN brief

### Egypt's ex-tourism minister gets 3-year jail term

AFP, Cairo

A Cairo court sentenced former tourism minister Zuheir Garana yesterday to three years in prison for illegally issuing operating licences to tourism companies, the state news agency MENA reported.

Garana had been previously convicted in May on different corruption charges to five years in prison.

He is one of many former regime officials who have gone on trial since a popular revolt ousted president Hosni Mubarak in February.

Mubarak himself is on trial for allegedly ordering the killings of anti-regime protesters and for alleged corruption. His two sons are also on trial for corruption.

### Pro-Russia party wins most votes in Latvia election

BBC ONLINE

A pro-Russia party has won the most votes in Latvia's snap general election but without an absolute majority.

The Harmony Centre won 29%, with almost all votes counted, the strongest showing for an ethnic Russian party since the former Soviet state's independence.

The new Zatlers Reform Party won 21% while the Unity bloc of Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis took 18%. They are likely to form a coalition to keep Harmony Centre out of government.

A quarter of Latvia's population is Russian-speaking.

During the Soviet period, which ended in 1991, Latvia experienced a big influx of immigrants from other parts of the USSR, mainly Russia.

### Sinn Fein confirms McGuinness for Irish presidency

AFP, Dublin

Martin McGuinness, a former commander of the IRA and Northern Ireland's deputy first minister, was officially confirmed yesterday as his Sinn Fein party's candidate for next month's Irish presidential election.

The socialist republican party's executive, the Ard Chomhairle, unanimously backed a proposal to support the 61-year-old, with Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams saying: "He embodies everything that is needed in a political leader."



PHOTO: AFP

"Red Shirt" protesters rally at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok yesterday. The rally marks the 5th anniversary of the coup that ousted former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, brother of current Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

## Pak govt linked to militants

Says US envoy in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

There is evidence linking the Pakistani government with the Taliban-allied Haqqani network of militants, the US ambassador in Islamabad said, blaming the group for last week's siege in Kabul.

In blunt comments broadcast by state-run Radio Pakistan on Saturday, ambassador Cameron Munter said: "Let me tell you that the attack that took place in Kabul a few days ago, that was the work of the Haqqani network."

"There is evidence linking the Haqqani network to the Pakistan government. This is something that must stop," Munter said.

His remarks follow a warning by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who said after the Kabul attack -- in which rebels fired rockets at the US embassy and Nato headquarters, leaving 15 dead -- that the US would retaliate against Pakistan-based insurgents.

The US has long urged Pakistan to take action against the Haqqani network and suspected the group had support within



Cameron Munter

government, Munter said only "we believe that to be the case".

Acknowledging that the past year had been "tough", he urged joint action against terrorism and said that the United States and Pakistan were "fundamentally on the same side".

There was no immediate reaction from Islamabad to the allegations but the Pakistani government has strenuously denied any links to militant groups.

The Haqqani network is thought to have been behind some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan, where Nato plans a gradual withdrawal of troops after a gruelling 10-year war.

Pakistan's feared intelligence services.

But the public comments are a mark of strained ties between the fragile anti-terror allies, with relations fractious since the US raid on Pakistani soil that killed Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May.

Asked to provide evidence of the link with the Pakistani

## Violence erupts on Liberia, Ivory Coast border

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

At least 15 people have been killed in an attack on the Ivory Coast's armed forces in the country's southwest, according to state television.

The state-run RTI network said on Saturday the attack happened overnight on Thursday and it appeared the assailants had come across the Liberian border into the Tai region of Ivory Coast.

The attack caught the soldiers by surprise, RTI reported.

"Members of the FRCI [Republican Forces of Ivory Coast] were attacked by surprise. The toll from the attack was 15 dead,"

RTI said, adding that reinforcements were being sent to the porous and densely forested border region.

Leon Alla Kouakou, the Ivorian military spokesman, confirmed there had been an attack in Tai, but did not provide details.

In July, West African leaders urged the United Nations and ECOWAS, the regional bloc, to step up monitoring of the Liberia-Ivory Coast border after signs that mercenaries had been operating there since April.

The leaders of Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone said at the time that insecurity on the Liberia-Ivory Coast border represented a threat to the entire West African region.

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E-mail: confuins@northsouth.edu Web: nsu.chinese.cn