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African fighters vow to support Gadhafi to the end

By MARTIN VOGL and DONNA BRYSON
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His allies and even his own diplomats are abandoning him, but African fighters are pledging to defend embattled Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi "to the end."

The African fighters that Gadhafi is allegedly using against protesters come from several nations, representing a map of the Libyan leader's often contentious history with his neighbors.

Many young citizens of Mali and Niger who flocked to Libya in the 1970s and 1980s were ethnic Tuaregs and were recruited into an "Islamic Legion" modeled on the French Foreign Legion.

A Tuareg politician in Mali said he believes 16,000 Tuareg remain in the Libyan security forces, based in Tripoli and Sabha but not in Benghazi, a major city that has broken away from Gadhafi's rule.

"We've been getting updates from some of them by phone," Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh told The Associated Press. "They say their orders are to protect Gadhafi and they will defend him to the end."

Witnesses in Libya have reported African fighters shooting at protesters or being captured by anti-Gadhafi forces. Witnesses have described mercenaries being flown in to put down the rebellion, but most fighters are already in the strife-torn country.

Some African regimes were indebted to Gadhafi for propping them up and opening up Libya to their workers, but such leaders are unlikely to send him troops now, said Alessandro Triulzi, a professor of African studies at the University of Naples who closely follows the former Italian colony.

"It is a question of what's in it for them, and he's not in a position to offer anything at this time," Triulzi said.

The African fighters were sent by Gadhafi to help Hezbollah in Lebanon and fight Soviets in Afghanistan, said Adam Thiam, a columnist with Le Republicain newspaper in the Malian capital of Bamako. In the 1990s, demobilized fighters returned to their homelands and fueled a Tuareg rebellion while thousands of others stayed in Libya and entered the regular Libyan forces, Thiam said.

African leaders took Gadhafi's support and money when it was offered, but that that did not mean they trusted or respected him — or will support him now, said Suliman Baldo, director of the Africa program for the International Center for Transitional Justice.

He said Gadhafi has a long history of destabilizing Africa and supported militant groups in Chad and Sudan's Darfur region.

"He's a spoiler," Baldo said. "But he was also trying to put out fires — sometimes ones he started himself.

"It was a bizarre situation. He had influence, but it was a facade, rather than a real thing."

Paul Sullivan, an expert on North Africa at the National Defense University and Georgetown University, said that Gadhafi has long used mercenaries, funding and training many fighting groups and rebel organizations in West Africa among other places.

Mercenaries are "hired to kill and sow fear in many places and some of the worst and most vicious of them can be found in Africa. Gadhafi knows this and hardly has any moral limitations on their use," he said. "But this is a fluid situation and information is scarce in some of the more shadowy parts of all of this."

Gadhafi also has used Libya's oil wealth to give aid to neighboring countries, among the poorest in the world, and to fund the transformation of the old Organization of African Unity into the African Union, which has helped resolve conflicts on the continent, Baldo noted. The AU this week condemned attacks on civilian protesters in Libya.

Some of those militant groups that funded Gadhafi may now feel they owe him a favor, said Roland Marchal, a researcher at the national Center for Scientific Research at Sciences-Po in Paris.

"I'm not saying that they are for sale," Marchal said. "But certainly, they have from time to time to pay some services back to someone who has helped them."

Some who got help from Gadhafi in the past are no longer in a position to repay.

There is now worry in other African nations about what might happen if Gadhafi falls, and the hired guns come home.

"If these men, well armed, come back to Mali and Niger, that is going to create a very unstable situation," Assaleh said.