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Al Jazeera

Fierce battles rage in Libya

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Forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader, are reported to have regained control of two strategic towns in the country's northwest, even as opposition fighters in the east prepare to march on the capital, Tripoli.

The claims about the fall of Gharyan and Sabratha on Wednesday came as fighting raged between pro- and anti-government forces over the control of the eastern town of Brega, the headquarters of several oil companies, and Gaddafi appeared on state television once again.

"They tried to take Brega this morning, but they failed," Mustafa Gheriani, a spokesman for the February 17th Coalition, an anti-government group, told the Reuters news agency.

"It is back in the hands of the revolutionaries. He is trying to create all kinds of psychological warfare to keep these cities on edge."

Al Jazeera's Jacky Rowland, reporting from Bengazi, Libya's second largest city now controlled by rebels, described the situation in the Brega region as fluid.

" I think it's fair to say that here is a fair amount of fighting going on in that area," she said.

Earlier the Associated Press news agency quoted Ahmed Jerksi, manager of the oil installation in Brega, as saying that pro-Gaddafi forces took control of the facility at dawn without using force.

There were conflicting claims about the casualties from these battles.

Government forces were also reported to be battling to regain control of rebel-held towns close to Tripoli, trying to create a buffer zone around what is still Gaddafi's seat of power.

Our correspondent said an air raid carried out by forces loyal to Gaddafi reportedly targeted a weapons store about 6km outside the eastern town of Ajdabiya.

Witnesses told the Associated Press news agency that they saw two warplanes bomb the town's eastern outskirts at 10am local time.

They also said pro-Gaddafi forces were advancing on the town. "I see two jets bombing now," one witness said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Another witness said rebel forces were rushing to the western side of Ajdabiya to meet the advancing pro-Gaddafi force.

Repeated air raids

Libyan forces have launched repeated air raids during the two-week revolt but all of them have been reported to target facilities that store weapons in areas controlled by the rebels.

Wednesday's developments come as the US sent warships to the region as part of a Western effort to pile more pressure on Gaddafi to stop his violent crackdown and step aside.



The destroyer *USS Barry* moved through the Suez Canal on Monday and into the Mediterranean Sea.

Two amphibious assault ships, the *USS Kearsarge*, which can carry 2,000 marines, and the *USS Ponce* passed through the canal on Wednesday.

The White House said the ships were being redeployed in preparation for possible humanitarian efforts but stressed it "was not taking any options off the table".

"We are looking at a lot of options and contingencies. No decisions have been made on any other actions," Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, said.

The US says Libya could sink into civil war unless Gaddafi quits amid fears that the uprising - the bloodiest against long-serving rulers in north Africa and the Middle East - could cause a humanitarian crisis.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, has cautioned that "Libya could become a peaceful democracy or it could face protracted civil war".

But Gaddafi remains defiant and his son, Saif al-Islam, has warned the West against launching military action, insisting that his father would neither step down nor go into exile.