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Al Jazeera

Battles rage over Libyan cities

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Pro- and anti-government forces are locked in intense fighting for control of several cities and towns across Libya, where a near month-long uprising is threatening to end Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's more than 41-year-old rule.

Some of the fiercest fighting is taking place in the cities of Ras Lanuf, Brega and Bin Jawad, besides Az-Zawayah, 50km west of the capital Tripoli.

Al Jazeera's Jacky Rowland, reporting from Ajdabiya, said that the pro-Gaddafi forces are intensifying their counter-assault on the rebel forces.

"The latest that we've heard on Thursday is that the Gaddafi forces are attacking by land from the west, along the coastal roads. They're also attacking from the south, from the desert," she said.



Flashpoint cities in Libya

"And, a key development, they're attacking as well from the sea, to the north. This clearly is a concerted effort to route the rebels from their western-most positions, and it comes on the heels of intense fighting from the two sides the day before."

The port city of Ras Lanuf also witnessed heavy fighting, where an oil installation has gone up in flames.

Pro-Gaddafi forces carried out air strikes behind rebel lines in Ras Lanuf on Thursday morning. One rebel told Reuters news agency that a bomb landed on a civilian house in the town.

Al Jazeera's Tony Birtley, reporting from Ras Lanuf, said that there's a major offensive happening to the west of the city, where sounds of concentrated artillery fire can be heard. Being attacked from multiple directions makes for a "very edgy atmosphere" there.

Gaddafi's men also pounded Az-Zawiyah with tanks and war planes.

"The revolutionaries control the centre of Zawiyah and Gadhafi's forces are surrounding it. It's 50-50," a resident who fled the city said.

"There was no one in the streets, the town is completely deserted, and there are snipers on the roofs," he said, adding that he did not know which side they were on.

Conflicting claims

Forces loyal to Gaddafi say they have wrested the city from the hands of rebels, a claim denied by those ranged against the Libyan leader.

Any independent confirmation of the claims and counter-claims, however, is difficult since journalists are unable to reach the city.

The rebel fighters are largely inexperienced. Abdul Razik Bubakar, 32, car mechanic who has joined anti-Gaddafi forces, told the AP news agency that he is learning how to use anti-aircraft gun on the fly.

"I didn't know anything about it. I just learnt in two or three days. Now I know how to use it, thanks to God. Now I am really quick using it, cleaning it and fixing it," said Bubakar.

"Maybe I don't have enough knowledge for this, but when I do it, thanks to God, it works out."

The battles are raging as rebels pile on pressure on the international community to impose a no-fly zone over Libya to cripple Gaddafi's airforce.

While several world powers have backed such a measure, the modalities are yet to be worked out with Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, saying such a move should be driven by the United Nations and not the United States.

NATO and European Union are beginning fresh talks on a no-fly zone on Thursday.

Amid such discussions, Gaddafi has launched his own diplomatic effort, sending emissaries to Brussels and Cairo.

Journalists tortured

Meanwhile, Britain has condemned the arrest and torture of three BBC journalists in Libya, saying it was more proof of atrocities committed by Gaddafi's regime.

The three were subjected to mock execution after being arrested on Monday at a checkpoint nearly 10km south of Az-Zawiyah.

The three men were then taken to a military barracks in Tripoli where they "suffered repeated assaults" by members of Libya's army and secret police before being released 21 hours later.

One of the reporters said he had seen 10 or 12 men from Az-Zawiyah in a prison cell who were "badly beaten", bearing signs of "torture on their faces and their bodies".

Cameraman Goktay Koraltan said he "heard a lot of screaming" where he was being held. "... I've seen a lot of bad stuff," he said.

The Libyan government has restricted the movements of foreign journalists based in Tripoli and says they must only travel with official escorts.