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Al Jazeera

Libyan rebels in westward push

3/27/2011

Libyan rebels are advancing further westwards, having taken control of the key towns of Ras Lanuf, Uqayla, Brega and Ajdabiya, our correspondents reported.

"It is pretty clear to me, and I am at the main refinery in Ras Lanuf, that here it is the opposition who are in control," Al Jazeera's James Bays reported on Sunday, after rebels had taken over the major oil exporting terminal.

Earlier on Sunday, Al Jazeera correspondents reported opposition forces advancing on the towns of Brega and then Uqayla, which they retook from Gaddafi forces.

"[There are] no signs of Gaddafi's forces here," Bays reported from Ras Lanuf.

"What they left behind is here, some of their weaponry is here, some of their armourments are here.

"But they have not left their tanks behind or any of their heavy armour, just some of the ammunition has been left behind, suggesting it was a pretty speedy retreat."

Earlier reports said that the rebels were not facing much resistance from pro-Gaddafi forces in the area.

The rebels had pushed westwards after making it to Brega late on Saturday. This came after they recaptured Ajdabiya from government controls with the help of western coalition air strikes.

Spurred on by the air strikes, the rebels were now headed towards Bin Jawad, another town west of Ras Lanuf, where fighting continued.

"The opposition forces have certainly pushed forward since they took control of Ajdabiya, after those air strikes on Ajdabiya, pushing along the coast heading westward towards Tripoli," Bays reported from near Uqayla earlier on Sunday.

Uqayla, about 110 kilometres west of Ajdabiya, is "important for its oil infrastructure, like many of these places along the coast" including Ras Lanuf, Bays said.

These key towns are on the road travelling westward towards Gaddafi's stronghold of Sirte.

Earlier, there were conflicting reports about who held control of Brega, which lies 80 kilometres to the west of Ajdabiya. Gaddafi's forces were said to be holding onto strategic sites in the nearby oil port, while the rebels said they were in control.

Elsewhere, shelling by Gaddafi's forces stopped in Misurata on Saturday when western coalition planes appeared in the sky, a rebel said.

Air strikes

The French armed forces said around 20 French aircraft supported by an AWACS surveillance plane struck targets during the day on Saturday, including five Galeb fighter jets and two MI-35 helicopters on the ground outside Misurata.

British missile strikes also destroyed three armoured vehicles in Misurata and two more in Ajdabiya, the Royal Air Force said in a statement.

Misurata is still under government control.

Ahmed Al Misrati, a pro-democracy activist, speaking from Misurata on Saturday, told Al Jazeera that the town was "besieged from all sides".

"Since morning [Misurata] has been under heavy gunfire and heavy bombardment ... by tanks or mortar shells," said Al Misrati. "They [Gaddafi troops] are also stationed in other rooftops, especially the high buildings."

On Saturday, fresh coalition air strikes were reported on the road between Gaddafi's home town of Sirte and Ajdabiya.

Moussa Ibrahim, a Libyan government spokesman, said that the strikes killed soldiers and civilians alike.

"Tonight the air strikes against our nation continue with full power," said Ibrahim.

"We are losing many lives, military and civilians.

"The road between Ajdabiya and Sirte includes many towns." He added, repeating a call for an immediate end of the air strikes and an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council.

Rebel fighters further east were celebrating on the streets of Ajdabiya on Saturday after driving pro-Gaddafi forces out of the town.

"There is no doubt about it, you can probably hear some of the celebrations behind me, Ajdabiya is in opposition hands," Al Jazeera's Bays said from the city.

"Gaddafi forces have been controlling the ring road that goes around Ajdabiya ... that has been the situation for six days, but they have now been cleared from that position."

But Libyan government officials said that the army had withdrawn to save residents from more bloodshed.

Rebel forces had initially captured Ajdabiya during an advance along Libya's east coast that was halted and reversed in a counter-offensive by government forces backed by superior air power earlier this month. But coalition airstrikes which have destroyed Libya's air force have tipped the balance back towards the rebels, Bays said.



'General captured'

Many fighters belonging to forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi were also taken hostage by rebels. Among them, according to reports in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, is one of Gaddafi's most senior soldiers, General Bilgasim Al-Ganga, said Al Jazeera's Turton.

"We're hearing reports that the number three in Gaddafi's army, Bilgasim Al-Ganga, has been captured overnight in fighting in Ajdabiya. He has a fierce reputation among the opposition who accuse him of committing many atrocities under the Gaddafi regime," our correspondent said.

On Friday, western warplanes bombed Gaddafi's tanks and artillery outside the town to break the battlefield stalemate and help rebels retake the town.

Plumes of smoke filled the sky as the pace of coalition air strikes escalated, forcing terrified residents to flee Ajdabiya, which is 160km south of the rebel stronghold of Benghazi.

Meanwhile, Barack Obama, the US president, said on Saturday that the military mission in Libya was succeeding.

"Because we acted quickly, a humanitarian catastrophe has been avoided and the lives of countless civilians - innocent men, women and children - have been saved," Obama said.

But Obama reiterated that the military mission was clear and focused and that the role of American forces had been limited. "Our military has provided unique capabilities at the beginning, but this is now a broad, international effort," he said.

Last week Libyan officials said nearly 100 civilians had been killed in the coalition strikes.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates dismissed the assertion on Saturday, saying: "The truth of the matter is we have trouble coming up with proof of any civilian casualties that we have been responsible for."