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## Libyan rebels retreating after Gadhafi onslaught

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Libyan government tanks and rockets pounded rebel forces into a panicked full retreat Tuesday after an hourslong, back-and-forth battle that highlighted the superior might of Moammar Gadhafi's forces, even hobbled by international airstrikes.

No such strikes were launched during the fighting in Bin Jawwad, where rebels attempting to march on Gadhafi's hometown of Sirte ended up turning around and fleeing east under overcast skies. Some fleeing rebels shouted, "Sarkozy, where are you?" — a reference to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, one of the strongest supporters of international airstrikes.

World leaders in London, meanwhile, debated how far they should go to force an end to Gadhafi's 41-year autocratic rule. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the world must speak with a single voice to ensure that the North African country "belongs not to a dictator, but to its people."

Rockets and tank fire sent Libya's rebels in a panicked scramble away from the front lines. The opposition was able to bring up truck-mounted rocket launchers of their own and return fire, but they went into full retreat after government shelling resumed.

The two sides traded salvos over the hamlet of Bin Jawwad, now pockmarked with shrapnel and small arms fire. Rockets and artillery shells crashed thunderously as plumes of smoke erupted in the town. The steady drum of heavy machine gun fire and the pop of small arms could be heard above the din as people less than a mile (a kilometer) outside the village scaled mounds of dirt to watch the fighting.

"This today is a loss, but hopefully we'll get it back," said Mohammed Bujildein, a 27-year-old from Darna. He was gnawing on a loaf of bread in a pickup truck with a mounted anti-aircraft, waiting to fill up from an abandoned gas tanker truck on the eastern side of Ras Lanouf.

Even in Ras Lanouf, roughly 25 miles (40 kilometers) east of Bin Jawwad, there appeared to be shelling — there were thuds in the distance and black smoke rising from buildings. Some rebels pushed farther east.

"If they keep shelling like this, we'll need airstrikes," Bujildein said. It makes it easier to go to Sirte. If there's air cover, we'll be in Sirte tomorrow evening."

Rebel forces had been on the brink of defeat by government forces before a U.N.-mandated no-fly zone and campaign of strikes by the U.S. and its allies helped them regain lost territory. It is unclear, however, if international support exists to deepen the air campaign and attack Gadhafi's heavy weaponry enough to help the rebels make further advances. Some countries, including Russia, contend the airstrikes already have gone beyond the U.N. mandate of protecting civilians from attacks by Gadhafi.

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said Tuesday there are plenty of "non-military means at our disposal" to oust the Libyan leader.

France, which has been at the forefront of the international campaign, struck a more forceful tone.

"We, the French and English, we consider that we must obtain more" than the end of shooting at civilians, Defense Minister Gerard Longuet said on France-Inter radio. He also said Libyan politicians could be targeted since they gave orders to the military.

In London, Clinton, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the Arab League, the African Union and around 40 foreign ministers began discussing the future of Libya and how to ratchet up pressure on Gadhafi.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said several nations planned to put forward a deal that would propose a cease-fire, exile for Gadhafi and a framework for talks between Libya's tribal leaders and opposition figures on the country's future.

In signs of emerging ties between the opposition and the international community, Clinton met with Libyan opposition envoy Mahmoud Jibril in London, and a senior Obama administration official said the U.S. would soon send an envoy to Libya to meet with rebel leaders.

The official said Chris Stevens, former U.S. envoy to Tripoli, will travel to the rebel stronghold of Benghazi in the coming days to establish better ties with groups seeking to oust the longtime Libyan leader. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning, stressed that the move doesn't constitute formal recognition of the opposition.

In an open letter to the international community, meanwhile, Gadhafi called for a halt to the "monstrous assault" on Libya and maintained that the rebels were supported by the al-Qaida terrorist network.

"What is happening now is providing a cover for al-Qaida through airstrikes and missiles to enable al-Qaida to control North Africa and turn it into a new Afghanistan," he said, accusing the international community of carrying out genocide against the Libyans.

Libyan state news agency JANA quoted a military official as saying that airstrikes of the "crusader imperialist assault" targeted civilian and military targets in Misrata, Tripoli, Zlitan, Mazdah and Watayah.

Prime Minister David Cameron, however, said Britain had received reports that it was Gadhafi who was pounding Misrata, the main rebel holdout in the west, and relentlessly targeting civilians.

"Gadhafi is using snipers to shoot them down and let them bleed to death in the street. He has cut off food, water and electricity to starve them into submission," Cameron said.

Rida al-Montasser, an activist in Misrata, confirmed heavy shelling on two streets in the city, but said rebels remain in control. Three people were killed in Misrata on Monday and several others were wounded.

The rebels remain woefully outgunned by Gadhafi's forces, though they do show some improvements since their siege of Ajdabiya a week ago. They have more ammunition and heavy weapons that they've captured from government forces, and they are showing better efforts at using them. But it is still unclear how they can take the stronghold of Sirte without further aggressive international air support.

The rebel advance reached Nawfaliyah, some 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Sirte, on Monday, but the next day they were driven back to the hamlet of Bin Jawwad, a few dozen miles (kilometers) to the east.

In a scene reminiscent of the rebels' rout last week, panicked volunteers jumped into their pickup trucks and attempted to speed away from the bombardment, kicking up dust clouds and choking the narrow coastal highway in a mad scramble of vehicles.

Sirte is dominated by members of the Libyan leader's Gadhadhfa tribe and was used as a second capital by Gadhafi. Its loss would be a symbolic blow and open the way to the capital, Tripoli.

"This is their last defensive line. They will do everything to protect it," explained rebel fighter Twate Monsuri, 26. "It's not Gadhafi attacking us, he's just defending himself now."

Gadhafi forces continued to besiege Misrata and Libya's third-largest city. Residents reported shelling by government tanks of residential areas, with three people killed.

The U.S. Navy reported that two of its aircraft and a guided missile destroyer attacked a number of Libyan coast guard vessels, rendering them inoperable, in the port of Misrata. It said the Libyan vessels had been "firing indiscriminately" at merchant ships.

One of Libya's top officials, meanwhile, abruptly made a "private visit" to Tunisia late Monday, according to the official news agency there.

Government spokesman Moussa Ibrahim in Tripoli insisted on Tuesday that Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa's visit was not a defection.