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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Reuters

Gaddafi troops seize western town: rebels

4/23/2011

Muammar Gaddafi's forces captured a main town in the Libya's remote Western Mountains Saturday, a rebel spokesman said.

"Gaddafi brigades seized control of the (Yafran) town center and we are currently in nearby villages," the spokesman, who identified himself as Ezref, told Al Arabiya television.

"They are firing mortars and Grad missiles," he said, adding that he had counted more than 44 Grad rockets fired in one hour.

Rebels had been rushing supplies to the area, largely cut off from the outside world in recent weeks because of attacks by Gaddafi's forces, two days after seizing a border crossing with Tunisia in the region.

Yafran and other mountain towns are inhabited by Berbers, ethnically distinct from most Libyans and traditionally viewed with suspicion by Gaddafi's government.

Residents queued in cars to bring food and gasoline from Tunisia into the area, where the fighting has not received as much international attention as the siege of the western port of Misrata or clashes in eastern Libya.

"The fact that we control this border gate means we have broken the isolation of the mountain region after several weeks," one rebel, who gave his name as Ezsine, said.

Western Mountains towns joined in a wider revolt against Gaddafi's four-decade rule in February.

At least 14,000 people have fled escalating violence there over the last few weeks through the border crossing near the southern Tunisian town of Dehiba.

"There is nothing in Yafran. If the rebels hadn't seized this border crossing, people there would have died of hunger," a man named Imed said before Gaddafi forces seized the town.

He said he was taking milk, food and other goods to the town.

Libya's government has denied rebels captured the border post. But about 40 insurgents were still at the crossing on Saturday and there was no sign of pro-government troops after Thursday's clashes. Some government soldiers have fled into Tunisia.

REBEL BORDER CHECKS

"Day by day, we are becoming more confident and we are asking NATO to step up their attacks against Gaddafi's forces," Ahmed, a 16-year-old armed with a rifle, said at the crossing.

As he spoke, his comrades checked people crossing the border in both directions -- some fleeing the Western Mountains, others returning. Scores of cars were waiting to enter Tunisia.

The insurgents said they feared a government attempt to retake the crossing, but were prepared.

As reports came through of insurgent advances in Misrata, the rebels clapped their hands and chanted "God is Greatest."

Misrata had been under a government siege for nearly two months and hundreds of civilians have died there.