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Battle for Libya shifts in desert sands as Gaddafi loyalists target oilfields

Daniel Howden sees the regime turn to guerrilla warfare in Jalo

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As the battle for Libya has reached a near stalemate along the Mediterranean coast, a guerrilla war has begun in the deep desert to the south where the country's strategic oil and water reserves lie.

The oasis of Jalo, 250km south of the front line between Ajdabiya and Brega, has witnessed repeated raids by a fast-moving enemy that attacks and then disappears back into the desert.

The assaults by regime forces come amid claims last night by the rebels that they had taken control of the airport in the western coastal city of Misrata, which has been under siege for nearly two months. But despite rebels claiming a major breakthrough against the forces of Muammar Gaddafi, the battle for control of the sparsely populated Jalo area could have greater long-term consequences.

When the town of Jalo rose up against the Gaddafi regime the day after the revolution began in Benghazi, regime loyalists fled – but they have since returned in force. The area is now ringed by pro-Gaddafi forces, who have occupied nearby oilfields and are using them to shelter from Nato air strikes and launch sabotage and kidnap missions.

The town has been assaulted twice since 30 April, but residents refused to surrender, said Ali Said Mawaj, who heads Jalo's rebel authorities, the Transitional National Council.

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"We are in big trouble here. They sent a message telling us to raise the green flag and give them our weapons or they will attack again."

People in Jalo rarely venture beyond the cover provided by its large date plantations and more than 30 people have been captured during raids in the town or on the exposed road to Ajdabiya, which is the only route north.

"We don't go outside because we don't have the strength," said Mr Mawaj. "We don't have the manpower to occupy the oilfields."

Nato planes struck one of the suspected loyalist bases near the "59" oilfield south of Jalo last week, but more attacks could risk setting the wells alight.

Sitting in an office flecked with bullet holes and a gaping hole in the wall from shelling in late March, the retired oil worker said the council moves its headquarters every few days to keep their attackers guessing. "The Free Libya flag has become a target," he said.

The oasis is the food basket for much of eastern Libya, and some of the country's most important oilfields are spread out near by. Columns of up to 200 light vehicles from the regime forces have launched raids across this desert range where settlements can be separated by hundreds of kilometres.

Groups of up to 25 pick-up trucks mounted with heavy machine-guns and rocket launchers attacked the oasis from four sides on 7 May and drove through the town. Four people were killed in a larger attack on 30 April.

The Gaddafi forces have resorted to guerrilla tactics, moving in smaller groups to avoid detection by Nato, cutting phone lines and blowing up mobile phone towers, locals said. A local policeman said that saboteurs had switched one of the oil junctions to send crude to the west instead of the rebel-held east. But for now the foreign oil workers have fled and the wells are not pumping.

The area's strategic importance is underlined by a huge section of water pipe displayed on the approach to Jalo's gate, and the town's symbol is an oil pump. Three of the five oilfields that surround it have been occupied, and the insecurity on the road has complicated efforts to resupply. Nasser Mohammed, a university lecturer who joined the rebel council, said concerns were mounting over the water pipelines that flank the road north.

Libya's coastal strip, where the vast majority of the population lives, relies on the "Great Man-Made River Project" which draws up water from a vast aquifer underneath the Sahara and pipes it north. Described by Colonel Gaddafi as the "eighth wonder of the world" it could become a target for sabotage in a prolonged war against the east – although it would dramatically reduce water supplies to his stronghold in Sirte and the capital, Tripoli. "Destroying the pipes is a possible option for them," said Mr Mohammed, who previously worked as an engineer in the project's control room.

The man-made river flows north through two pipes just seven metres beneath the surface, and its path is clearly marked by solar-powered overflow pipes. Sabotaging the pipes would leave the eastern cities with only one month's supply of water in the reservoir at Ajdabiya, said Mr Mohammed.

Jalo's defences are manned by an army of untrained locals who have moved into the Gaddafi family residence at the northern entrance to the oasis. One of hundreds of lavish villas with barracks to accommodate his bodyguards, the main house has been ransacked by rebels and then shelled during reprisals by loyalist forces. Libya's self-styled "Guide" came to Jalo three times but never stayed the night. Only the chandeliers remain from the villa's furnishings.

Omar al-Majbari, a 27-year-old volunteer with the Jalo fighters, said he would not have been allowed to walk outside the villa's walls previously.

"Many times we had to say 'Gaddafi, you're the best'," he said. "Now I'm proud to be standing inside his house."

But he knows that Jalo could pay a high price for defying the old regime: "We will try to fight them if they come but without Nato we will all be killed."