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NATO arming of Libyan rebels on the rise?

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BRUSSELS, Aug. 12 (UPI) -- Amid renewed diplomatic flurry over finding a negotiated end to the military stalemate in Libya, reports of consistent European arming of the rebels are gaining more currency.

Officials remain tight-lipped over speculative reporting of a recent buildup in heavy arms shipments to the Libyan strongholds, the only confirmation so far confined to a French admission in June of "light" weapons transfers.

But military analysts say more than "light" equipment is entering Libya's rebel-held territories. With funds channeled out of Libyan assets partly unfrozen under NATO orders, large amounts of cash has flowed into arms purchases to help the rebels' advance.

A decisive military victory continues to elude the Transitional National Council, however.

Rebel commanders and political leaders are busy networking across the Atlantic and running embassies gifted to them in London and Washington but the rebels are nowhere close to establishing their writ over Libya.

As U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for more energetic efforts to secure a political solution, military analysts in Europe see the U.N. mandate being used liberally to facilitate increasing arms transfers to Libyan rebel forces, ostensibly to defend civilians against forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

NATO forces began enforcing a U.N.-mandated, no-fly zone over Libya in March -- mainly to

protect civilians from attacks by loyalists. As much time has elapsed without a clear military outcome, international and European interpretations of that mandate have multiplied.

In July, NATO leaders even offered Gadhafi an exit route to circumvent the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant in a bid to secure a political solution, reports at the time said.

Gadhafi faces arrest for crimes against humanity committed since he ordered a crackdown on dissent in February but that option is also negotiable if signs emerge of a negotiated end to the conflict. NATO negotiators offered to let Gadhafi stay in Libya, stripped of power but divisions over the proposed deal arose quickly.

Ban's comments confirmed that negotiations with Gadhafi were continuing, despite frequent denials that no talks with the Tripoli government were afoot.

Ban said he spoke with Libyan Prime Minister al-Baghdadi Ali al-Mahmudi to say he was "very troubled" about the lack of progress on finding a political solution to the crisis. Ban, in statements issued through his spokesman's office, said "all sides must commit to a political process."

NATO officials in statements this week suggested forces loyal to Gadhafi were showing signs of defeat, however.

"Although it will be premature to jump to conclusions, it is becoming more and more apparent that pro-Gadhafi forces are losing their ability to conduct massive offensives," said Col. Roland Lavoie, a spokesman for the NATO mission in Libya, in a statement.

Analysts wonder if the rebels' newly acquired arsenals have anything to do with the perceived change in the conflict's direction.

The shipments were believed to include French-made Milan anti-tank missiles sent from Qatar and directly from France. Additional supplies came from Egypt and included the Maadi Misr assault rifle, the Egyptian produced version of the Kalashnikov AK-47. The Libyan army is armed with variants of the Kalashnikov and they will have been easily assimilated by the rebels, Anthony Tucker-Jones argued on the Web site, publicserviceeurope.com.

Further military aid from Italy was passed on as "self-defense material" and rebel ranks were seen with Swedish designed Carl Gustav 84mm recoilless rifles. It is unclear how they ended up in Libya, but presumably via a third party.

Tucker-Jones cited "speculation they had come from Britain, which had a license to produce the Carl Gustav in the past." British Foreign Secretary William Hague insists Britain has only provided non-lethal equipment.

Gadhafi loyalists recently put on display of captured munitions and weapons they claim were provided by EU members, including anti-tank weapons, 68mm rockets and mortar rounds. In addition, the rebels received help from British, French and Italian military advisers sent to

Benghazi.

Libya was a major importer of EU weapons, and some British exports that didn't materialize -- including an order for 130,000 Kalashnikovs -- were likely fulfilled by other countries, including Romania.

Before the conflict began, Malta sold Gadhafi more than \$122 million of small arms it purchased elsewhere.

Analysts said some of the Soviet-designed or Russian-made equipment could also have been supplied by Western suppliers. Tucker-Jones cited the CIA as a potential source for Soviet-designed weapons.