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Al Jazeera

Gaddafi vows to fight as rebels close in

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Libyan rebels have continued to consolidate their grip on the capital, Tripoli, by capturing Muammar Gaddafi's main compound in the Bab al-Aziziya district, but the country's elusive leader issued a defiant message to loyalists as he continued to evade capture.

The storming of Bab al-Aziziya appears to herald the de facto end of Gaddafi's 42-year-old rule, but with his whereabouts still unknown and his powerful sons unaccounted for, the rebels cannot declare victory.

Al Jazeera's Evan Hill, reporting from Gaddafi's compound, said sporadic gunfire, explosions and rocket fire could still be heard on Wednesday morning. Rebels appeared to be firing rockets within the compound, our correspondent said, although there was no indication what they were firing at.

There were also reports of heavy gunfire coming from the area of the Rixos hotel in Tripoli, where dozens of international journalists are trapped, guarded by heavily armed Gaddafi loyalists.

Gaddafi said on Wednesday in audio remarks broadcast by the al-Rai television channel that Tripoli residents must repel the rebels' advance.

"All Libyans must be present in Tripoli, young men, tribal men and women must sweep through Tripoli and comb it for traitors," he said. "I have been out a bit in Tripoli discreetly, without being seen by people, and ... I did not feel that Tripoli was in danger."

Al-Rai quoted the Libyan leader as saying that he had retreated from his Tripoli compound in a "tactical move" after 64 NATO air strikes reduced it to rubble.

The channel broadcast an excerpt of the message in which Gaddafi vowed his forces would resist "the aggression with all strength" until either victory or death.

Moussa Ibrahim, the chief spokesman for Gaddafi's government, also managed to get word out in a phone interview with the same station, promising "We will be back to take Tripoli back".

'Ticking time bomb'

He claimed Gaddafi's forces still controlled 80 per cent of the capital, which he said was a "death trap" and "ticking time bomb" for the rebels.

Al Jazeera's Sue Turton said there were still pockets of resistance across Tripoli.

"They [the rebels] have flooded in with all sorts of artillery to try to take Gaddafi loyalists out," she said of fighting at a restaurant near Gaddafi's compound.

Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, who heads the National Transitional Council (NTC) and was a minister in Gaddafi's government until the February uprising against his rule, cautioned: "It is too early to say that the battle of Tripoli is over. That won't happen until Gaddafi and his sons are captured."

Reports had circulated of Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, being captured by the rebels but he [made a defiant public appearance](#) on Tuesday, smiling and shaking hands with supporters. The whereabouts of five of Gaddafi's other sons remains unknown.

Rebels entered Gaddafi's compound after fighting for five hours with his loyalists outside, using mortars, heavy machine guns and anti-aircraft guns.

They killed some of those who defended the compound and hauled off thousands of rifles, crates of weapons and trucks with guns mounted on the back in a frenzy of looting.

"We're looking for Gaddafi now. We have to find him now," said Sohaib Nefati, a rebel sitting against a wall with a machine gun.

Abdel-Aziz Shafiya, a 19-year-old rebel dressed in camouflage with a rocket-propelled grenade slung over one shoulder and a machine gun over the other, said the rebels believed Gaddafi was inside the compound but hiding underground.

"Wasn't he the one who called us rats? Now he is the rat underground," he said.

'New Libya'

Senior officials within the rebels' ranks have said the country's transition "begins immediately" and that Qatar will host a meeting on Wednesday to organise \$2.4bn in aid for the country.

"We will build a new Libya, with all Libyans as brothers for a united, civil and democratic nation," Mahmoud Jibril, the number two in the National Transitional Council, which runs areas of the country in rebels' hands, [told a news conference](#) in Qatar's capital, Doha.

The six-month conflict, which followed uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, has been buoyed by NATO air strikes which have weakened Gaddafi's military installations.

In the de facto rebel capital of Benghazi, hundreds of miles east of Tripoli, the news of the Bab al-Aziziya storming was greeted with celebratory gunfire and firecrackers. Men drove around waving rebel flags.

Ibrahim Dabbashi, Libya's former deputy ambassador to the UN, said he expected the entire country would be in rebel hands within 72 hours.