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After Gadhafi, Unease Rules

By Karlos Zurutuza

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TRIPOLI – "The war is over and Gadhafi already buried. What else could we possibly ask for?" says Adnan Abdulrafiq at his busy street restaurant in Omar Mukhtar street in downtown Tripoli. But troubles may not have ended with the war.

Abdulrafiq's restaurant is just 50 meters from Martyrs square, the capital's main gathering point. The place which hosted Gadhafi's big displays of force and support is overrun today by people proudly boasting the tricolor Libyan flag, a symbol forbidden until recently, but today ubiquitous on billboards, car stickers and scarf. Necklaces, purses and key rings of all shapes and sizes with the new stamp can be bought at almost every makeshift stall.

"Somebody must be making big money with all this merchandising, I wonder if it is Qatar," says youngster Hafiz, in clear reference to the early and unconditional support Qatar offered to the revolution.

"Learn together", "Hug each other", read two different posters on several walls. "Reconciliation" was one of the main points Abdul Halil, president of the National Transitional Council (NTC) mentioned during his speech last Sunday, when the official declaration of the end of the war was announced from Benghazi, Libya's second city in eastern Libya.

But the difference in the mood from other messages is also tangible: "Have you seen this person?" is a question that appears over the picture of hundreds of faces on wall posters. The date of their disappearance is written next to a telephone contact.

But if there's a missing and wanted person in Libya today, it is Saif al Islam – Gadhafi's son still on the run. "Wanted dead or alive", reads a poster by the National Bank entrance before somebody scratched "alive" off.

"More than 50,000 Libyans have died in this war. We should forgive but never forget what the price of freedom has been," says Rahul Tarhuni, a fighter just arrived from Misrata – the rebel enclave in Western Libya which suffered a long and brutal siege by Gadhafi loyalists.

For the last two months, Tripoli has been a favored destination for fighters from Misrata and Nafusa – a mountain range 100 kilometers south-east of Tripoli. Although their role in the fall of Tripoli was doubtless vital for those who rose against the Gadhafi, many local Tripolitans think it's already time for them to pack and leave their city.

"They shoot in the air every night, even with ant-aircraft artillery mounted on their pick-ups," laments Nawja Shakh, a former high school Arabic language teacher.

"Did you know that more than 60 people were injured here by accident when they killed Gadhafi?", adds the 35-year-old woman. Fifty meters behind us, a man takes a picture of his children holding a Kalashnikov rifle.

Selah Rahman, a 30-year-old resident, is also upset about the presence of these "lawless" militias.

"Just yesterday, one of them greeted me with an "Allah-u-Akbar" (God is great). As I didn't reply the same way, he accused me of being a Gadhafist and said he would arrest me." Rahman says he has supported the revolution "from the very beginning". But he fears he could run into trouble.

"I want a modern and secular country, and not another oil-rich and mediaeval Emirate," says Rahman with dismay. The announcement last Sunday that Libya's future laws would be based on the Sharia has caused unrest among many citizens in Tripoli who fear religion may play an excessive role in the new Libya.

For the time being, there is some feeling of normality in Libya's capital. The call to pray from the mosques still mixes with music coming from cars stuck in Tripoli's painful traffic jams.

Luckily enough, the price of petrol has dropped dramatically since supplies were restored. A price of 0.15 Libyan dinars/liter (7 euro cents) is something most car owners can afford.

Along Tarik Mukhtar – the "airport road" – the recently pulled-down walls of Bab al Aziziya – Gadhafi's former residential bunker, stand out. The debris of the ousted ruler's house and, very

especially, its web of tunnels underneath, have turned a former symbol of terror into a favored "fair ground" for the local families.

A bit further south lie dozens of abandoned apartment blocks. Several foreign construction companies were building entire residential districts, but they all left before the job was finished.

The asbestos barracks set up for workers of a Turkish construction company have turned into a makeshift refugee camp. Eighty families from Beni Walid, one of Gadhafi's last two strongholds to fall 100 kilometers east of Tripoli, have called this place "home" for over a month.

"I went back to Beni Walid to check what was left of my house," recalls Khalifa Mohamed Khalifa, 50, at the entrance of the complex. "Everything had been looted so I left. I came across two rebel fighters. They told me to hand them the keys of my car and they drove away. All the money I had left, my papers, everything was inside the car. I've got nothing today."

Such stories are common. Abdul Hadi shows IPS a picture of his looted house on his mobile phone. He most misses the land property documents. "My family has lived there over the last 500 years but look where we are now," says Hadi, pointing to the barracks behind him.

"You cannot say that all the revolutionaries are liars," says Adnan, with a rebel flag printed on his t-shirt. "You're free to speak now but you should tell the truth," he says to the refugees gathering around us. The presence of the unidentified security man makes people uncomfortable. Soon, all of them leave for dinner inside the barracks.

"I know Gadhafi is dead but I still see him in many people's attitudes," says the taxi driver on way back to downtown Tripoli.