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Qaddafi to loyalists: Retaliate against protests

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(CBS/AP)

Updated 1:44 p.m. ET

BENGHAZI, Libya - Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi told a crowd of his supporters massed in a central Tripoli Square to fight back against protesters and "defend the nation."

Qaddafi, wearing a fur cap and sunglasses, spoke from the ramparts of the Red Castle, a historic fort, overlooking Green Square, where over 1,000 of his supporters were massed Friday evening, waving pictures of him and green flags.

"Retaliate against them, retaliate against them," Gadhafi said, speaking by microphone from the ramparts of the Red Castle, a Crusader fort overlooking the square. Wearing a fur cap and sunglasses, he shook his fist in the air, telling the crowd, "Dance, sing and prepare. Prepare to defend Libya, to defend the oil, dignity and independence."

He warned, "At the suitable time we will open the arms depot so all Libyans and tribes become armed, so that Libya becomes red with fire." The crowd waved pictures of the leader and green flags as he said, "I am in the middle of the people in the Green Square. ... This is the people that loves Muammar Qaddafi. If the people of Libya and the Arabs and Africans don't love Muammar Qaddafi then Muammar Qaddafi does not deserve to live."

Anti-Qaddafi protests erupted during the day Friday, met by gunfire from pro-regime militia.

Qaddafi, pumping his fist in the air, told the crowd to "retaliate against them, retaliate against them" and "prepare to defend the nation and defend the oil."

Militias loyal to Qaddafi had opened fire earlier on protesters streaming out of mosques and marching across the Libyan capital to demand the regime's ouster, witnesses said, reporting at least four killed. In rebellious cities in the east, tens of thousands held rallies in support of the first Tripoli protests in days.

In the capital's Souq al-Jomaa district, protesters came under fire from gunmen on rooftops as they tried to march to Tripoli's central Green Square, several miles away. "There are all kind of bullets," said one man in the crowd, screaming in a telephone call to The Associated Press, with the rattle of gunfire audible in the background.

One witness reported seeing three protesters killed in Souq al-Jomaa, and another reported a fourth death in the district of Fashloum, where another rally was trying to march to the center. The reports could not be immediately confirmed.

[Tripoli airport "chaotic," streets "abandoned"](#)

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Gunmen opened a hail of bullets on thousands heading toward the center from Tajoura, a crowded impoverished district on the eastern side of the capital, a participant said.

"We can't see where it is coming from," he said. "They don't want to stop." He said one man next to him was shot in the neck. Others reported gunfire near Green Square itself where dozens of militiamen opened fire in the air to disperse protesters coming out of a nearby mosque. Other armed Qaddafi supporters were speeding through streets in vehicles, said another witness.

The call for regime opponents to march from mosques after prayers was the first attempt to hold a major anti-Qaddafi rally in the capital since early this week, when militiamen launched a bloody crackdown on protesters that left dozens dead. In the morning and night before, SMS messages were sent around urging, "Let us make this Friday the Friday of liberation," residents said. The residents and witnesses all spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

As the opposition called for mass demonstrations as it seeks to solidify its gains, the government responded by tightening security in the capital. CBS News producer Ben Plessner, reporting from Tripoli, said there "checkpoints everywhere" with police officers inspecting identification several times on the way from the airport.

"We are obviously being escorted everywhere by agents of the government, who make sure we only see what they would like us to see," Plessner said.

Qaddafi's crackdown -- the harshest by any Arab leader in the wave of protests that has swept the Middle East the past month -- has so far helped him maintain control of Tripoli, home to about a third of Libya's 6 million population. But the uprising has divided the country and raised the specter of civil war.

[Libyan: Qaddafi forces shoot hospital patients](#)

Tripoli is the center of the eroding territory that Qaddafi still controls. The uprising that began Feb. 15 has swept over nearly the entire eastern half of the country, breaking cities there out of his regime's hold.

Signaling continued defiance, Qaddafi's son Seif al-Islam, vowed his family will "live and die in Libya," according an excerpt from an interview to be aired later Friday on CNN Turk. Asked about alternatives in the face of growing unrest, Qaddafi said "Plan A is to live and die in Libya, Plan B is to live and die in Libya, Plan C is to live and die in Libya.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch has put the death toll in Libya at nearly 300, according to a partial count. Italy's Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said estimates of some 1,000 people killed were

"credible."

Even in the pocket of northwestern Libya around Tripoli, several cities have also fallen into the hands of the rebellion. Militiamen and pro-Qaddafi troops were repelled Thursday when they launched attacks trying to take back opposition-held territory in Zawiya and Misrata, near the capital, in fighting that killed at least 30 people.

"The city's been sacked," the Martin Chulov, a Middle East reporter for the U.K.'s Guardian told CBS Radio News from opposition-controlled Benghazi in the east. "All government institutions, all instruments of state have been looted and ransacked. There are no regime figures in control, there are no signs of any Qaddafi loyalists."

Chulov said that opposition forces had recently taken control of an air force base, marching out with huge quantities of bullets, rocket-propelled grenades and heavy artillery. He said that the rebels were contemplating an westward push and an eventual attempt to take the Libyan capital, but that no firm plans exist at this time.

Support for Qaddafi continued to fray within a regime where he long commanded unquestioned loyalty.

In Tobrouk, CBS News correspondent Mandy Clark got a firsthand look at the power vacuum left behind in parts of eastern Libya. A people's militia on the side of the protesters gave CBS News a tour of a weapons depot they were guarding. The ground was littered with dangerous munitions, scattered when retreating troops loyal to Qaddafi blew up bunkers to keep them out of rebel hands.

A group of army officers who also refused to fight against their fellow citizens told CBS News that Qaddafi has very little support in the army.

[Qaddafi's reading list: Obama, Tom Friedman, Fareed Zakaria](#)

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Libya's delegation to the United Nations in Geneva announced Friday it was defecting to the opposition -- and it was given a standing ovation at a gathering of the U.N. Human Rights Council. They join a string of Libyan ambassadors and diplomats around the world who abandoned the regime, as have the justice and interior ministers at home, and one of Qaddafi's cousins and closest aides, Ahmed Gadhaf al-Dam, who sought refuge in Egypt.

On a visit to Turkey, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said the violence by pro-Qaddafi forces is unacceptable and should not go unpunished.

"Mr. Qaddafi must go," he said.

Meanwhile, a ferry chartered by the U.S. government has [left the Libyan capital early Friday afternoon](#) after being blocked in port by rough seas for three days. The ferry is carrying hundreds of U.S. embassy employees and other Americans as well as some other foreign nationals, and will make an 8-hour journey

to the island nation of Malta. With staff fully evacuated, the U.S. State Department said it was [suspending all embassy operations in Libya, effective immediately](#).

Tens of thousands of other foreigners are trying to flee Libya, with Turks and Chinese climbing aboard ships by the thousands. Europeans are mostly boarding evacuation flights while North Africans race to border crossings in overcrowded vans.

The upheaval in the OPEC nation has taken most of Libya's oil production of 1.6 million barrels a day off the market. Oil prices hovered above \$98 a barrel Friday in Asia, backing away from a spike to \$103 the day before amid signs the crisis in Libya may have cut crude supplies less than previously estimated.

The opposition camp says it is in control of two of Libya's major oil ports -- Breqa and Ras Lanouf -- on the Gulf of Sidra in central Libya. A resident of Ras Lanouf said Friday that the security force guarding that port had joined the rebellion and were helping guard it, along with residents of the area.

Qaddafi's militiamen -- a mixture of Libyans and foreign mercenaries -- have clamped down hard in Tripoli the past week after the Libyan leader called on his supporters to take back the streets from protesters and hunt them in their homes. A wave of arrests has taken place in recent days, with residents reporting security forces raiding homes and dragging away suspected protest organizers.

Starting Friday morning in Tripoli, militiamen set up heavy security around many mosques in the city, trying to prevent any opposition gatherings. Armed young men with green armbands to show their support of Qaddafi set up checkpoints on many streets, stopping cars and searching them. Tanks and checkpoints lined the road to Tripoli's airport, witnesses said.

Several tens of thousands held a rally in support of the Tripoli protesters in the main square of Libya's second-largest city, Benghazi, where the revolt began, about 580 miles east of the capital along the Mediterranean coast.

Tents -- some with photographs of people who had been killed in fighting -- were set up and residents served breakfast to people, many carrying signs in Arabic and Italian. Others climbed on a few tanks parked nearby, belonging to army units in the city that allied with the rebellion.

"We will not stop this rally until Tripoli is the capital again," said Omar Moussa, a demonstrator. "Libyans are all united ... Tripoli is our capital. Tripoli is in our hearts."

Muslim cleric Sameh Jaber led the prayers in the square, telling worshippers that Libyans "have revolted against injustice."

"God take revenge from Moammar Qaddafi because of what he did to the Libyan people," the cleric, wearing traditional Libyan white uniform and a red cap, said in remarks carried by Al-Jazeera TV. "God accept our martyrs and make their mothers, fathers and families patient."

Similar rallies took place in other cities in the east, as well as in opposition-controlled Misrata, Libya's third largest city, located in the northwest of the country, about 120 miles from the capital.

Several thousand were gathered in Misrata's main square, chanting their support for the Tripoli protesters, a doctor at the main hospital said. A day earlier, militiamen attacked Misrata residents guarding the local airport. The doctor said 20 residents and one attacker were killed in the violence.

The worst bloodshed Thursday was in Zawiya, 30 miles west of Tripoli. An army unit loyal to Qaddafi opened fire with automatic weapons on a mosque where residents -- some armed with hunting rifles for protection -- have been holding a sit-in to support protesters in the capital, a witness said. A doctor at a field clinic set up at the mosque said he saw the bodies of 10 dead, shot in the head and chest, as well as around 150 wounded. A Libyan news website, Qureyna, put the death toll at 23.

Zawiya, a key city close to an oil port and refineries, is the nearest population center to Tripoli to fall into the opposition hands.

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said Friday that the bloc needs to consider sanctions such as travel restrictions and an asset freeze against Libya to achieve a halt to the violence there and move toward democracy.

NATO's main decision-making body also planned to meet in emergency session Friday to consider the deteriorating situation, although Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said the alliance has no intention of intervening in the North African nation.

The U.N.'s top human rights official, Navi Pillay, meanwhile, said reports of mass killings of thousands in Libya should spur the international community to "step in vigorously" to end the crackdown against anti-government protesters.

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by jschmidt27 February 25, 2011 4:32 PM EST

Q could go to Zimbabwe and live with Mugabe the dictator. They could talk about the old dictator days rocking on porch of his tent with his all female body guard. Maybe Chavez could join them what country finally gets the picture that Chavez is bankrupting the country. Throw in Ahmedinajad and they could get a poker game together. A the old dicators home. Maybe Baby Doc can be a substitute one Haiti kicks him out again.

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by **amazedd** February 25, 2011 4:00 PM EST

French Taunter: I dont wanna talk to you no more you empty headed animal foot-trough water. I fart in your general direction, you English Kniggits!
Reply to this comment

by **Biker-N-OH1** February 25, 2011 2:11 PM EST

Hey Moooeeeeemar, just step down dude. Somebody is going to turn you into that martyr that you want to be. Step down, have some egg on your face and live. Act like a crazed lunatic, murder the people you supposedly govern and die. You choose...
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by **TheKnowerseeker** February 25, 2011 12:54 PM EST

Time to end the peaceful protests and begin the civil war. Each of the protesters who are killed or wounded is one less recruit for the people's rebellion against Quaddafi.
Reply to this comment

by **WiseAsOwl** February 25, 2011 12:17 PM EST

It appears to me that the Libyan protesters desperately need one or two strong and aggressive leaders... Mass demonstrations, with no specific plans or goals, aren't going to get the job done.. All it will create is dead people. They need to have the leadership so that they can quickly overrun Qaddafi's forces.. Winning quickly would be the best way to minimize blood shed...
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