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Defiant Gaddafi vows fight to death

By Hebah Saleh and Andrew England in Cairo

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Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader, vowed to fight until the last drop of his blood had been spilt rather than step down, describing anti-regime protesters as "rats" and "mercenaries" working to foreign agendas.

In a threatening 75-minute TV address on Tuesday, delivered from the ruins of a former Gaddafi family home bombed by US military aircraft in 1986, he called on supporters to "cleanse Libya house by house" unless the protesters surrendered.

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There were few reports of fighting or demonstrations on Wednesday morning, suggesting Gaddafi supporters had not heeded his call.

Abdelfattah Younis, the interior minister who joined the opposition on Tuesday, told Arab television stations on Wednesday that he was calling on security forces to side with the people.

He said he had joined the protestors in Benghazi and that the tribes too were now on people's side. Mr Younis has been joined by other defectors on Wednesday, including an aide to Saif al-Islam, Mr Gaddafi's high-profile son.

"I resigned from the Gaddafi Foundation on Sunday to express dismay against violence," Youssef Sawani said in a text message sent to a Reuters correspondent. He was executive director of the foundation, which has been Saif al-Islam's main vehicle for wielding influence.

Meanwhile, Franco Frattini, Italian foreign minister, said that the estimate of 1000 deaths "of innocent people" in the unrests in Libya is "a likely number", when speaking at a conference in Rome on Wednesday morning.

Mr Frattini also told Italy's Corriere della Sera's newspaper that Europe "should expect 200 to 300 thousand migrants from Libya", indicating that most would not be Libyans but refugees who currently live in the country.

Nicolas Sarkozy, French president, on Wednesday urged the European Union to impose sanctions on the Gaddafi regime amid its violent crackdown on protesters.

During his speech on Tuesday, Colonel Gaddafi - often shaking his fist defiantly - said youths who had taken to the streets of Libyan cities to oppose his rule were manipulated by others who gave them drugs and were trying to turn the country into an Islamic state.

"These gangs are like rats," he said. "They represent nothing, not even one in a million of the Libyan people."

Although forces loyal to Col Gaddafi have already killed hundreds, the Libyan leader said he had not yet ordered the use of force. "When I do, everything will burn," he said.

Inspired by the revolutions that ousted the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt in the past month, Libyans have risen up against Col Gaddafi, who has ruled them with an iron fist for more than four decades.

The Libyan leader seems to have lost control of the east of the country, traditionally a centre of resentment towards his rule. Residents reached by telephone said they feared a backlash from the regime and were not certain if troops stationed in the region would stay neutral.

Ibrahim Dabbashi, the deputy ambassador at Libya's dissident mission to the UN, said he had received information that after Col Gaddafi's speech "an attack on the people started in the west of Libya. I think the genocide started now in Libya."

The UN Security Council condemned the violence, as did the Arab League, which said it would bar Libyan representatives from its meetings until the security of the country's people was re-established.

Timeline: Gaddafi's Libya



Forty years of the Colonel, since his seizure of power in 1969, through pariah status to rehabilitation with the West, from pan-Arabism to the African Union and the eruption of protests

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Libya is the first major oil-producing state to be affected by the wave of revolts in the Middle East. Oil prices surged after the country's biggest two producers, Eni of Italy and Hispano-Argentine group Repsol YPF, halted production. OMV of Austria said it was reducing operations. **Crude output from the country has fallen by at least a fifth this week prompting oil prices to rise.**

Brent crude is currently up 0.8 per cent at \$106.60 and oil traded in New York is above \$95 a barrel for the first time since October 2008.

The protests spread to Tripoli, the capital, at the weekend, but on Tuesday the city was calm after a night of fierce clashes.

Demonstrators had planned a march to Green Square, the plaza overlooking the Mediterranean where Col Gaddafi usually holds ceremonies and military parades. But their rally was pre-empted by security forces who attacked the impoverished area of Fashloum, home to many of the protesters, residents told the Associated Press news agency.

One resident was quoted as saying that militiamen, including African mercenaries, had "shot any moving human being". He said ambulances were targeted, so the wounded were left on the streets to die.

Amid international concern about the security situation, governments scrambled to evacuate expatriates and hundreds of refugees crossed into Egypt.

Libya's diplomatic service abroad has fractured into those calling for Col Gaddafi to go and those loyal to the regime.

"It looks like the army is still in control and in power," said an expatriate resident in Tripoli. "In our neighbourhood we have Gaddafi's son Muhammad living nearby. Yesterday, the army surrounded the area to secure him and there was a helicopter circling above. They are still surrounding the two blocks around his home."

An increasing number of foreign countries are evacuating their citizens. Two Turkish ferries, accompanied by a frigate, evacuated some 3,000 people from Benghazi port on Wednesday. But people trying to leave via Tripoli airport described scenes of chaos as some airlines cancelled flights and a lack of phone and internet connections made organising bookings extremely difficult.

Egyptair said it was sending six empty aeroplanes to Tripoli to repatriate Egyptians.

Additional reporting by Giulia Segreti in Rome

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