

Terrified residents flee battle of Benghazi - Scene

L-MARJ, March 19, 2011 - The exodus began shortly after the first air strikes hit Benghazi, as deep booms shattered the morning silence, and plumes of black smoke rose from the sites of attacks in the city's south.

The roads out of the city quickly filled with vehicles -- cars, pick-up trucks, mini-buses -- many with the hastily-gathered possessions of fleeing families strapped to their roofs.

Inside them, people used every available space to seat a child, stash a blanket or store food. One small car alone was packed with 10 people.

Shops in the city were shuttered, and the streets almost empty as residents tried to find any way to flee the sudden assault by Moamer Kadhafi's forces.

At checkpoints set up by rebels across the coastal city, fighters were defiant, firing their guns into the air and waving rocket launchers as residents passed through "Kadhafi will die! Kadhafi will die!" they shouted. One man holding a frayed green flag, that of the Libyan government, ground it into the dirt underfoot to display his contempt for the Libyan leader.

But the rebels' defiance was belied by the desperate flow of people out of the city, backing up traffic along the coastal road leading to Libya's border with Egypt and overwhelming petrol stations along the route.

"Of course we're scared, we have children with us," said 24-year-old Mohamed Sheikhi from Benghazi, who was fleeing with 14 other members of his family.

"We left once the bombing started... We'll stay wherever we can," he said, standing next to the family's packed car, on the roadside in the town of Al-Marj, about 100 kilometres (65 miles) east of Benghazi.

Sheikhi said he was hoping to get to Al-Baida, a town another 100 kilometres east, where some relatives might be able to put them up.

At every eastern village and town, residents welcomed their fleeing compatriots, pledging to help them however they could.

"Free, anything you need is free," they shouted from the roadside as vehicles passed. Some waved Libyan dinars in the air, while others offered housing, fuel and food to the displaced residents.

"You've honoured us with your presence, welcome, welcome," some shouted.

As the convoy of departing cars passed the outskirts of one small town, men and boys dashed forward to hand out blue plastic bags of provisions.

Inside were cartons of milk, tea bags and instant coffee, canned cheese, dates and even plastic bags of olives and almonds.

In the village of Kowkara, men lined the streets carrying handmade signs reading "You are welcome in the homes of your brothers in Kowkara."

In Al-Marj, a city of around 25,000, residents said they had seen a continuous flow of cars passing through since the early morning.

"From eight in the morning we've seen these cars streaming by, we've waving them through and trying to help them," said 37-year-old Bassam Ekreish, who was standing at a checkpoint with a machine-gun hanging from his shoulders.

"You see that building over there," he said, gesturing to a two-story building nearby, "we're putting up several families there."

Nearby, Um Mohaned, a shy woman wearing a flowered headscarf, sat in the front of a pick-up truck, surrounded by children.

She and 16 members of her family had left the central Benghazi neighbourhood of Al-Bwatny in the early morning, shortly after the first airstrike hit the city's south. "We heard the attacks and we left. We were scared," she said. "We left everything behind, we're going anywhere we can now."

Libyan fighters: rebels without an officer

OUTSIDE AJDABIYA, March 23, 2011 - Kamal Mohamed stands with rebel fighters atop a sand dune, trying to spot Libyan government forces in the distance. His toes curl over his flip-flops into the sand, he has no weapons.

Nowhere to be seen are the military officers who defected to the rebel side, or the heavy military materiel captured from government forces as they withdrew from the rebel stronghold of Benghazi earlier in the week.

As Mohamed peers south, towards the outskirts of the key town of Ajdabiya, where forces loyal to Moamer Kadhafi are arrayed, a small group of rebel fighters set out into the desert, planning an "ambush" of government troops.

Their civilian clothes are starkly visible in the bright sun, dark against the hot desert sand. Some hold Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades, others nothing more than a knife.

Within minutes they are spotted and tank fire begins to land all around, whizzing through the air and thudding down, sending up a spray of sand.

Mohamed and others dash down the sand dune, tripping, landing on each other. He loses a flip-flop in the desperate retreat, scooping it into one hand as he tries to escape the incoming fire.

He smiles apologetically when asked about the wisdom of launching an "ambush" in the middle of the day, with such a lightly-armed force.

"We don't know what we're doing," he admits. "They don't know about military strategy, they are just trying to help."

Mohamed, a 31-year-old plumber, is in even worse a position than many of the young men gathered on the so-called front -- he lacks any sort of weapon.

"I'm waiting for someone to be killed, then I'll take whatever he has and try to use it."

Among the rag-tag group of rebels gathering each day outside Ajdabiya, officers and military personnel who defected to the opposition are noticeable by the absence.

"You can see, it's only kids, and everyone is running everywhere he wants. It's not really organised," says 54-year-old Jamal Zelitny, an oil engineer carrying a Kalashnikov he says he has yet to fire.

"They need someone to organise them. The kids just take things into their own hands before taking advice from the people who are in charge."

Also noticeably absent from the frontline rebel position is any of the heavy military materiel that the opposition forces have captured in recent weeks, including tanks and armoured vehicles.

Instead, when Kadhafi forces open fire with tanks and heavy artillery, the young men flee in pick-up trucks and ordinary cars. In one retreat, at least five are seriously wounded. Two appear to be dead.

Khaled al-Sayeh, the outgoing spokesman for the rebel's military council, says the opposition forces are trying to "minimise casualties" to their side, but that the young rebels are difficult to control.

They are there "against the better judgement of a lot of people," he said.

"They are mostly from the area of Ajdabiya and are very anxious to get to their loved ones and the control over them has been quite difficult."

But on the frontline, Mohamed says he is eager for leadership and wants to know why military officers who have defected to the opposition are nowhere to be seen.

"We're angry, we don't understand. We don't have any communications with them," he said, after a second mad dash away from a volley of tank fire.

"We want commanders, we want advice, we don't know what we're doing. There's no one responsible here, there's no one in charge."

Among some rebel fighters, Zelitny included, there is faith that opposition military forces are carrying out their own "secret operations."

But incoming military council spokesman, Air Force colonel Ahmed Bani, denies that the professional military opposition are acting independently.

"We are absolutely not working separately," he told. "We are preparing ourselves now for the big battle, in terms of weapons, in terms of strategy," he said, declining to give any specifics on preparations or attack plans.

He also refuses to comment on the location of captured heavy military materiel, insisting only that it will be used when appropriate.

But Bani admits that there is no communication with the young men heading to the front each day, where enthusiasm for the fight remains high despite the impossible odds.

"It's difficult," Zelitny says. "But I'll keep coming here until Kadhafi's gone."

At site of Kadhafi's defeat, carnage and craters

AJDABIYA, March 26, 2011 - The body lies on its back, the charred head staring upwards, the right arm bent and the hand reaching out, everything below the upper torso gone -- the remains of a soldier from Moamer Kadhafi's forces.

The man's curly hair is still visible atop his scorched face. Standing over him, locals from the town of Ajdabiya take pictures and stare wide-eyed.

The body is one of dozens strewn on the road outside of Ajdabiya, a key eastern town that sits at the junction of roads leading to the oil town of Tobruk and the rebel-stronghold of Benghazi.

Ajdabiya was the scene of fierce fighting, and what locals describe as a brutal siege by Kadhafi's forces, which ended in the early hours of Saturday morning, after two days of heavy coalition airstrikes.

The damage caused by the aerial bombardment is astonishing. Body parts -- some identifiable as such, pink and covered with flies, others little more than piles of ash -- are visible next to blankets and the carcasses of tanks.

A medical team from the city works to clear the bodies from the site, loading one after another from a stretcher into the back of a white pick-up truck. Volunteers wearing blue-green face masks try to cover the bodies.

One doctor, Osama Al-Qasy, estimates at least 21 bodies have already been put into the truck at the site, a few kilometres outside of Ajdabiya's gate leading west.

"But there are so many body parts, pieces, that we don't know yet how many there are here."

And as he walks away, more bodies are discovered, blown out of tanks or armoured vehicles by air strikes that charred the ground and left craters the size of garden ponds.

The blackened earth next to one dismembered tank -- its turret blown clean off -- recalls the aftermath of a volcanic explosion.

At Ajdabiya's eastern gate, too, there are bodies, a pair lying metres apart, each surrounded by a gaggle of spectators.

Among the crowd there is little sympathy for the dead, with many accusing the soldiers of being mercenaries.

One man brandishes a consular identity card issued by the embassy of Chad in Tripoli that he says was taken from a body further up the road. It is issued in the name of Omar Bakr Ahmed, born 1982.

But some of those surveying the scene provided a counterpoint to the triumphalist mood.

"I'm sad because some of these are Libyans, and they didn't know the truth," said Mohamed Jomaa, a pharmacist at a Benghazi hospital who was helping collect the dead.

"Kadhafi lied to them, he told them there were no fighters, that there was no no-fly zone, he told them we were Al-Qaeda."

In the midst of the disaster area were signs of the life the Kadhafi forces lived as they held Ajdabiya -- rotting food, particularly dates, littered the scene, attracting thousands of flies that followed bystanders.

Next to one tank was an English language workbook, its page edges singed but the colourful exercises still visible.

All around were munitions, mortars and tanks shells packed into wooden crates painted in dark green.

One set of crates bore white labels reading "Tripoli" in English. The munitions inside were labelled HE-19 TNT. Elsewhere crates were printed with "12 smoke shells for 60 mm mortars."

Residents of Ajdabiya, neighbouring Brega to the west, Benghazi to the east, and villages strung between the three, rifled through the munitions case, apparently unconcerned by the potential risk.

Along the road, rebels and visitors drove past beeping their horns in celebration.

Mohamed Salem, an engineer from Ajdabiya, said he thought the fall of the city was the beginning of the end of Kadhafi.

"I think Kadhafi will leave in a few days. This is the city that matters, that's why he did this to us."