

“Humanitarian” Bunker Buster Bombs: NATO cranks up air campaign in Libya

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AP In this photo taken on a organised government tour smoke rises from debris as foreign journalists take photographs next to a damaged truck at the Hadba agricultural area, outside Tripoli, Libya, on Wednesday, which Libyan officials claim was a target of a NATO air strike on Tuesday night.

The strikes, which hit on Tuesday afternoon, continued overnight. Early Wednesday, some 10 explosions shook the Libyan capital. It was not immediately clear what was hit.

The NATO has markedly stepped up its aerial bombardment of Tripoli in a fresh effort to hasten the fall of the Qadhafi regime, which refuses to throw in the towel despite a spate of recent defections.

Since Tuesday morning, Tripoli was subjected to relentless bombardment which appeared to pause only at dawn on Wednesday. The attacks, with heavy “bunker buster” bombs that can easily rip through concrete structures or destroy underground complexes, smashed large parts of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi’s Al Aziziya compound.

Witnesses said a large area of the compound had been devastated. Six to seven buildings lay in smouldering rubble of concrete and mangled steel. The wrecked buildings included one which had a reception centre for foreign dignitaries, and housed a VIP guest house as well. Some of the other ruined structures were used for administrative purposes, said local officials. Libyan authorities said 31 people had been killed in the bombing spree. Officials claimed around 10 to 15 people were buried in the rubble of one building.

Analysts say the aerial bombardment alone is unlikely to cause the collapse of the regime. The intent appeared to be psychological — to conveying the impression that the regime was doomed and stir larger defections from Mr. Qadhafi’s camp. Labour Minister Al-Amin Manfur is the latest senior official to part ways with Mr. Qadhafi. He announced his defection to the opposition Transitional National Council (TNC), based in Benghazi, at a meeting of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva, AFP reported.

Steeling the impression that the Libyan leader’s days are numbered, U.S. President Barack Obama announced on Tuesday that Mr. Qadhafi’s political exit from Libya was “just a matter of time”. Speaking in Washington at a news conference with visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Mr. Obama said: “What you’re seeing across the country is an inexorable trend of the regime forces being pushed back, being incapacitated.”

Stung by the air strikes, Mr. Qadhafi struck a defiant note, declaring that in no way was he fading away. In a nine-minute audio address amid the bombardment, he said: "You are setting fire to the sea, you are setting fire to the desert, and you are chasing a mirage. What do you want? What do you want? Did we cross the sea and attack you? Why this consistent bombing? Are you trying to force us into submission? You will not; we will never submit."

Regardless of Mr. Qadhafi's verbal riposte, NATO appeared unlikely to lower the tempo. NATO officials met in Brussels on Wednesday, with its Secretary-General urging member countries to expand their participation in the Libya campaign.

The International Contact Group is set to meet in Abu Dhabi on Thursday to build on the May 5 decision taken by the group in Rome to establish a new fund to support the opposition. Discussions include prospects of the opposition tapping the frozen assets of the Qadhafi regime.

With military pressure on the Libyan government mounting, Russia on Wednesday offered to mediate between the opposition TNC and Tripoli.

"I met with Muammar Qadhafi before and I am ready to meet with him now as well, if he is willing to receive me," presidential envoy Mikhail Margelov told Russian radio station Ekho Moskv. He said that the TNC, with whom he had already held meetings, was ready for a dialogue with Mr. Qadhafi.

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