

Qaddafi pushes rebels back. Obama names Libya intel panel

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The big offensive pro-Qaddafi forces launched Friday night, March 4, to wrest from rebel hands control of Libya's most important towns and oil centers resulted Saturday in the recapture of the key town of Zawiya and most of the oil towns around the Gulf of Sirte.

In Washington and London, talk of military intervention on the side of the Libyan opposition was muted by the realization that field intelligence on both sides of the Libyan conflict was too sketchy to serve as a basis for decision-making.

Their reports from their primary sources, American military advisers and intelligence officers attached to the Benghazi-based rebels in the east, are fragmentary and often contradictory. They too appear unclear about who is command the assorted militias in revolt against the Qaddafi regime and who gives those commanders their orders. Over the weekend, shapes began to emerge of informal armed civilian groups cohering occasionally into small militias who then decide independently whether to seize a certain piece of territory or town and hold it against military pressure. When there are no troops around, the rebels claim victory.

This is what happened Friday night when the opposition claimed to have finally captured Brega, the important oil terminal and refinery town south of Benghazi and, later, Libya's second oil terminal town of Ras Lanuf. However, according to debkafile's sources, while these opposition successes were widely reported, they were not confirmed. Opposition militias seized only parts of Brega - and not the most important ones, such as the oil exporting harbor which Qaddafi's forces control - and were still camped 15 kilometers outside Ras Lanuf when they claimed its capture.

Both towns are major prizes and have been tenaciously fought over. Their fall into rebel hands would cut Qaddafi off from fuel supplies and choke of Libyan exports of 500,000 barrels of oil a day. While only a third of Libya's regular export capacity, this amount it nonetheless nets him enough money to bankroll his war effort against the uprising against his rule.

Friday night, the rebel militias in the east suffered a major setback which halted their advance: Two ammunition dumps in Benghazi which they had seized from the Libyan army in the third week of February in were blown up, wiping out the anti-Qaddafi militias entire ammunition stocks. The cause of the explosions has not been established. Speculation ranges from a pro-Qaddafi suicide saboteur to aerial bombardment or the negligence of rebels inexperienced in ordnance maintenance.

Inside information about Qaddafi's forces is just as sparse. He is known to be supported by

three elite brigades under the command of two of his sons, Khamis and Mutassim and the Defense Minister Maj. Gen. Abu Baker Younis Jaber, but intelligence about them is hard to come by, except that the most effective professional unit is the Khamis Brigade No. 32 of the Libyan army, which Saturday morning won the battle for Zawiyah 30 kilometers west of Tripoli, using tanks, Grad surface missiles and artillery to break down opposition defenses..

debkafle's Washington sources report the shortage of the most basic information on the ground has seriously constrained deliberations between President Barack Obama, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the next steps in Libya. To correct this, Obama in the last 48 hours established a supreme intelligence commission on Libya made up of Pentagon, NSC and CIA experts to scrape together any data available as input for decisions.

By creating this panel, the president has also sidestepped the stiff opposition to his policies coming from Gates and Clinton, especially his inclination to explore limited military intervention to expedite Qaddafi's removal. They are also critical of Obama's policies in general with regard to other Middle East centers of unrest, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Following Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in Cairo, the Egyptian military junta in charge of the transition to democracy appears to be losing its grip on the situation events and letting the street protesters run out of control. Friday night, thousands stormed the national security services Alexandria headquarters and are still in there. The Muslim Brotherhood appears to be setting the tone in the Egyptian street amid reports of an internal coup by militant young leaders against the veterans.

The Obama administration has a better inside picture of the state of Egyptian opposition groups than it has about Libya, but it is still rated inadequate. US policy-makers are short of precise information about the real leaders of the opposition groups and to whom they are answerable.

In Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, Shiite demonstrations shouting anti-American slogans, which have become a daily event among the two million Shiites living and working in the eastern oil regions, have spread to Riyadh. Thousands of non-Shiites demonstrated once on Friday and twice on Saturday, prompting the Saudi government to ban demonstrations and protests altogether.

The Wall Street Journal's reported Saturday, March 5, claiming that "The US is settling on a strategy in the Middle East aimed at keeping longtime allies who are willing to make democratic changes in power." Even if this is true, the change comes far too late to affect the tide of unrest surging through the region. After he summarily evicted Hosni Mubarak, America's staunchest Arab ally in the region in the second half of January, President Obama will be hard put to find any other ruler in the region willing to put his trust in Washington.

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