

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, February 21, 2011 8:02 AM
To: H
Subject: Overnight update from dcm in tripoli

They are asking for ordered departure from post at bottom of email fyi.

Tripoli

The security situation deteriorated significantly overnight. It is the Embassy's assessment that Libyan authorities are losing control of the capital, with a further decline likely tonight.

There were anti-regime protests and violent clashes throughout Tripoli during the night, with heavy gunfire ongoing from 10 PM until early this morning. A rumor that Libyan leader Muammar al Qadhafi had fled to Venezuela sparked celebrations throughout the city after midnight, with thousands of Libyans rushing to Green Square; government security forces then reportedly opened fire in Green Square on the gathered civilians. Two Embassy local employees were eyewitnesses to this, and claim they saw at least 9 bodies in the aftermath.

Embassy staff have observed several burned police stations throughout the city, as well as the People's Assembly building (parliament-equivalent) on fire. The Italian Embassy reports that the Interior Ministry was also set on fire overnight. In parts of the city, omnipresent billboards of Qadhafi have been torn down. Burned out hulks of police cars are visible on several roads.

State TV broadcast a speech by Qadhafi son Saif al-Islam al Qadhafi late in the evening, in which he noted "Libya is not Tunis or Egypt," threatened civil war if the violence did not stop, and blamed foreign interference for the protests. His words were not well-received by most Libyans and it appears that his speech may have further agitated anti-regime sentiment.

There are press reports that the "HQ's of state TV" have been seized by anti-regime demonstrators. We cannot verify those reports. The main state TV HQ's (located near the Italian Embassy) appear calm and well-guarded by government security, according to our Italian colleagues. As of 1 PM, state TV continued to broadcast recorded clips including music, footage of pro-government demonstrators and repeats of Saif al-Islam's speech.

There are reports of looting at various locations throughout the city, including the compound of a South Korean construction firm (where 3 Korean citizens were allegedly injured), as well as schools. The cellphone network went completely down in Tripoli for long periods throughout the night, but is now operational again.

Security checkpoints have been set up throughout the city, with some manned by the "Khatiba," Qadhafi's personal militia.

Libyan security forces guarding the Embassy remained in place throughout the night, and are currently at their posts. The Embassy is closed today; only essential staff are on the compound. We will have several staff members remain on-compound for the next 24 hours to maintain communications with Washington and monitor the situation. EAC has determined that, given the Embassy's vulnerable security, it is safer for other staff members and EFM's to shelter at their homes for the rest of the day and overnight tonight.

As of 12 PM, we received unconfirmed reports that an anti-regime protest was headed to Green Square. From the Embassy compound, we can hear sporadic gunfire.

Benghazi

Based on numerous eyewitness reports, it is the Embassy's assessment that the government no longer controls Benghazi. This is likely the case for Ajdabiyah as well. Numerous sources in Benghazi report that Libyan Interior Minister Abdul Fattah Younes has "changed sides" and is "now with the protesters in Benghazi." The mood in Benghazi and Ajdabiyah is allegedly "celebratory" and all posters of Qadhafi have been knocked down. There are reports of widespread looting, including from a variety of expatriate companies' compounds outside of Benghazi.

A contact in Benghazi reports that, in protest of Saif al-Islam's speech yesterday, Libyan workers that support operations at three eastern province oilfields are striking.

Consular:

We have been trying to get 7 Amcits who work for U.S. construction firm AECOM, plus 4 Amcit minors and their two Libyan parents, onto a UK charter flight out of Benghazi. The UK Embassy informed us this morning that their sources report that the Benghazi airport is no longer in government hands, and "no one is operating it." They have thus deemed it unsafe to fly in to, and are suspending the charter flight. They are exploring alternative options. For the moment, we are advising the Amcits to shelter in place.

We are receiving numerous calls from Amcits who want to depart Libya, but cannot get seats on flights from Tripoli. The Embassy has not been able to get tickets for our departing EFM's or personnel for today; earliest availability is tomorrow, still unsure if we can get flights booked for all tomorrow. As discussed in the call with Ops Center earlier this morning, we recommend Washington explore the option of a charter flight to Tripoli to evacuate Amcits. We estimate between 300-600 Amcits would want to avail themselves of such flights.

Depending on the category of Libyan visa they hold, expatriates (including Amcits) are required to obtain exit visas in order to depart the country. Several Amcits have already raised their need for exit visas with us. We and other embassies are requesting of the MFA that this requirement be waived for the moment. We have not received any indication yet that it will be waived, and will likely require senior-level USG intervention with FM Musa Kusa on this issue.

The American School of Tripoli has decided to close for the next 2 weeks.

We have received reports of two dual American-Libyan nationals being arrested (details sent to CA-OCS-Duty and CA-OCS-ACS-NESCA). We have attempted to raise their cases with the Assistant Secretary-equivalent at the MFA's Consular Affairs Department; he has not responded to our multiple phone calls.

Admin:

Per our separate EAC report cable, the Embassy is requesting to go to ordered departure for EFM's and non-essential staff. We plan to evacuate 27 EFM's and 8 staff, which would leave us with 19 staff remaining in Tripoli.