

# Libya protests: gunshots, screams and talk of revolution

Benghazi student says fear of Muammar Gaddafi's regime is ebbing away

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Stories are circulating that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has poisoned the water as he fights to end demonstrations in Benghazi and Tripoli. Photograph: Sabri Elmhedwi/EPA

Afraid to leave her barricaded home on the outskirts of Benghazi, a student blogger and member of Libya's youth protest movement sat shaking as she described the violence unleashed on the Mediterranean city in five days of demonstrations against the Libyan regime.

"I've seen violent movies and video games that are nothing compared to this. I can hear gunshots, helicopters circling overhead, then I hear the voices screaming. I can hear the screeching of four-by-fours in the street. No one has that type of car except his [Gaddafi's] people," she told the Guardian by phone, occasionally crying. "My brother went to get bread, he's not back; we don't know if he'll get back. The family is up all night every night, keeping watch, no one can sleep."

The student, an expert in subverting net censorship, had regularly posted messages online to gather support for protests that began last week, but now her internet connection is down, landlines cut off, mobile coverage interrupted, electricity sporadically cut off and the house plunged into darkness. "There are even stories here that he [Gaddafi] has poisoned the water, so we dare not drink. If he could cut off the air that we breathe, he would."

She was still afraid to utter Muammar Gaddafi's name over the phone but said that now hundreds of protesters had been killed in Benghazi, Libya's second city, people's fear was ebbing away and they were talking openly of revolution.

"Now people are dying we've got nothing else to live for. What needs to happen is for the killing to stop. But that won't happen until he is out. We just want to be able to live like human beings. Nothing will happen until protests really kick off in Tripoli, the capital. It's like a pressure cooker. People are boiling up inside. I'm not even afraid any more. Once I wouldn't have spoken at all by phone. Now I don't care. Now enough is enough."

Benghazi, 620 miles east of Tripoli, has always been a bastion of opposition to Gaddafi's 40-year regime, with residents complaining they have seen little of Libya's wealth from the largest oil riches in Africa. But, as doctors gave details of more than 200 unarmed civilians killed by large-calibre automatic weapons, there was a feeling that the uprising had turned a corner and that the state-organised violence would bring more people out on to the streets in outrage.

Protests began in the city last Tuesday night but escalated over the weekend as demonstrators periodically came under attack from security forces firing out of their high-walled compound. As thousands gathered for funeral corteges to bury the dead, the mourners' processions passing the city's barracks were fired on. Unarmed protesters were reported to have attacked the barracks with stones and some petrol bombs. They were reportedly fired on with automatic weapons.

One local doctor, Brayka, told the BBC a massacre was under way in the city. "Ninety per cent of these gunshot wounds [were] mainly in the head, the neck, the chest, mainly in the heart," she said. A Benghazi resident describing the demonstrations and funeral processions on Saturday said: "A massacre took place." He said security forces had used heavy weapons, adding: "Many soldiers and policemen have joined the protesters." Another resident described a crowd of 10,000 protesters heading for a cemetery "to bury dozens of martyrs".

On Sunday thousands of people, including women and children, came out on to the seafront and vast crowds gathered near Benghazi's northern courthouse as ritual prayers were recited in front of 60 bodies laid out. "The protesters are here until the regime falls," one demonstrator told Reuters. A tribal figure said security forces were confined to their compound. "The state's official presence is absent in the city and the security forces are in their barracks and the city is in a state of civil mutiny."

With no foreign media or local journalists allowed into the city and phonelines down, information was hard to verify. The dead were said to be mainly aged between 13 and 35,, although one 80-year-old was reportedly killed, according to doctors interviewed by French and UK TV.

Libya's al-Yawn website quoted a doctor who claimed 285 people were dead in Benghazi alone. There was confusion over who was firing at the crowds. Automatic fire was believed to have come from elite security forces. Several residents suggested mercenaries from neighbouring countries such as Chad had been paid to shoot demonstrators. "They are wearing yellow helmets," one resident told French radio of the reported mercenaries.

One resident, Moftah, told al-Jazeera the city had become a war zone. Local residents had formed vigilante groups to keep watch over neighbourhoods.

The protest movement spread to Tripoli, where dozens of lawyers held a sit-in in front of the courts in protest against the regime. Gunshots were reported in the Fachlum and Tajura suburbs. In working-class areas of the Gourghi neighbourhood in western Tripoli, protesters against the regime gathered chanting slogans against Gaddafi. Residents said the Libyan security forces fired teargas and live ammunition to disperse the crowds. Al-Jazeera reported clashes between thousands of protesters and Gaddafi supporters in the city's central Green Square. Near the square, one hotel worker told Reuters: "There are disturbances ... We haven't had such disturbances before."

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\* From guardian.co.uk, Sunday 20 February 2011 20.52 GMT:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/20/libya-gunshots-screams-revolution>