

Convoys leaving Libya have fuelled speculation on Gaddafi deal with Rebels

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Fools believe US/NATO -- all previous deals with Balkan leaders have been dishonoured

Reports emerged yesterday of convoys of vehicles heading south across the border. The reports gave rise to feverish speculation that Colonel Gaddafi and perhaps his sons had finally abandoned the land for which they had vowed to die fighting.

In Libya hard facts are like a vision of water in the desert, a constantly receding mirage. At the very least it seemed that several senior officials including Mansour Dao, Colonel Gaddafi's personal security chief, had concluded that the game was up and fled.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland later said senior officials of the ousted regime were in the convoy, but added: "We do not believe that Gaddafi himself was among them."

A Niger army officer said his soldiers escorted a convoy of between 200 and 250 vehicles from the border to the desert town of Agadez. A newspaper owner said that he saw several dozen Libyan pick-up trucks pass through Agadez on their way to Niamey.

A customs official in Niger claimed that Mr Dao and other senior members of the regime were in a convoy of a dozen vehicles that crossed the border, while a member of the Libyan rebels' National Transitional Council (NTC) claimed that another convoy of vehicles belonging to Mutassim, Colonel Gaddafi's son, was loaded with cash and gold stolen from the Libyan central bank in Sirte, the deposed dictator's home town. Another report said that a convoy entered Niger from Algeria. Colonel Gaddafi's wife, daughter and sons Hannibal and Mohammed fled to Algeria last month.

An intelligence source told The Times that South Africa had brokered a deal allowing Colonel Gaddafi to pass through Niger en route to Burkina Faso, which has offered him temporary asylum. He said the deal had been approved by the NTC to avoid further bloodshed in Libya, by France, whose fighter jets shadowed the convoy, and by Niger, whose army escorted it once it crossed the border. He claimed that Colonel Gaddafi crossed into Niger on Sunday, accompanied by Saif al-Islam, his second son, but that was contradicted by other officials.

Alain Edouard Traore, Burkina Faso's Communications Minister, said on state television last night: "We have heard nothing about [Gaddafi's] whereabouts ... But if he were to show up at our border he would be treated in keeping with international law."

Mohamed Bazoum, Niger's Foreign Minister, denied that the ousted Libyan leader was in the convoy. "The truth is that several people, of varying importance, arrived in Niger. That's it. There are no high-profile figures, certainly not Gaddafi himself nor any of his sons," he said.

Leon Panetta, the US Defence Secretary, said he knew only that Colonel Gaddafi was "on the run". The State Department said that Niger had said that the convoy carried at least a dozen senior members of the Gaddafi regime, but had given no indication that Colonel Gaddafi was among them. The US urged Niger to arrest those subject to prosecution in Libya.

Colonel Gaddafi's spokesman, Moussa Ibrahim, who is also in hiding, told a Syrian television station that the deposed leader had not left the country and was "planning and organising for the defence of Libya". Mr Ibrahim added, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that "we are still strong and capable of turning the tables on NATO".

Were Colonel Gaddafi to flee Libya, Burkina Faso might well be his chosen destination. Although it has recognised the NTC it benefited greatly from his largesse during his 42-year rule and has publicly offered him asylum.

Colonel Gaddafi also enjoys considerable support among Niger's large Tuareg population, having funded their campaign for independence.

Burkina Faso and Niger are both signatories to the International Criminal Court, which has issued a warrant for Colonel Gaddafi's arrest for crimes against humanity, but in July the African Union urged its members to disregard the warrant.

Far to the north Tripoli continued its speedy return to normality. Water and electricity supplies have been restored. Petrol stations have reopened, though there are long queues. Fresh fruit, vegetables and meat are on sale again. Some police have returned to their jobs. Rubbish is being cleared away, most barricades have been removed, and anti-Gaddafi graffiti is being cleaned from walls. The first flights have landed at the airport.

Last night, the son of Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi, the Lockerbie bomber, gave the BBC access to his home in Tripoli, where his father lies close to death.

"I want everybody, especially in UK and specific in Scotland, to see my dad, how he's doing," said Khalid, the son.

"He's so sick, because I see in the news some people say he's not sick and some people say he's not at home and some people say he's run away. But I would say I want you to come to see my dad and he can't move from his room."

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[The above report is unsubstantiated speculation and rumour. The safest approach with negotiations is to lure as many Western high officials and rebel leaders as possible to a meeting, then detonate.]

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