

Resentment builds in Libya's devastated Sirte

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SIRTE, Libya Oct 27 (Reuters) - Residents of Muammar Gaddafi's home town of Sirte are struggling to come to terms with the destruction and humiliation of their city, a former fishing village which once had aspirations to be the "capital of Africa".



NATO's 'humanitarian' bombing

After rebels captured swathes of Libya, Gaddafi sought sanctuary in the city he had groomed as an international hub with its own grand conference centre. During an eight-week siege, much of Sirte was reduced to rubble in fighting between Gaddafi loyalists and fighters of the new interim government.

"We never expected such destruction," said a resident who gave his name as Abu Abdul-Rahman, pointing to his bullet-riddled television and broken furniture. "Is this what they call a revolution? We chose to flee instead of fighting and still they destroyed our homes."

He added: "They treated us like animals who didn't deserve to be protected."

Many in Sirte resent the soldiers of Libya's new leaders, who they blame for Gaddafi's humiliating capture and death last week and for what they say was the deliberate destruction of the city.

"We lived with Gaddafi for 42 years. He never attacked our houses with his army," said another Sirte resident, sitting in his damaged house. "Muammar lived and died like a man," he added, Gaddafi's green flag still hoisted atop his house.

The gruesome display of Gaddafi's body in a cold room in the neighbouring city of Misrata has infuriated members of his tribe and many Sirte residents.

"People will not forget the humiliation that happened to him. I am not from his tribe, but I tell you, I will not forget what happened to him," said the resident, who declined to be named.

Fighters from Misrata handed the decaying bodies of Gaddafi and his son Mo'tassim, who was also captured alive in Sirte last week, for burial at a secret desert location on Tuesday.

A week after it fell to fighters with the National Transitional Council (NTC), Sirte still looks like a ghost town. Most of its 100,000 residents had fled the fighting.

On Thursday, some volunteers were seen sweeping rubble and broken glass on streets lined with burnt cars and damaged buildings. Others helped medical workers search for the dead.

In some areas, the stench from rotting corpses covered with flies forced medical workers to wear masks. Parts of bodies burned beyond recognition were put in plastic bags.

Some 300 bodies were found and buried in the past few days, local people and medical workers said. Locals buried 25 bodies on Wednesday, including ten which were found floating in a water pool with their hands tied behind their backs.

"EXECUTION"

New York-based Human Rights Watch this week called on the NTC to investigate a suspected mass execution of 53 Gaddafi loyalists whose bodies were found last week near an abandoned hotel in a part of Sirte that was controlled by its fighters.

Pro- and anti-Gaddafi graffiti sprayed on the walls of Sirte highlight the deep divisions entrenched in Libya's tribal society and the risk that those tensions could boil over in a country awash with weapons.

On several street walls, "Misrata, the city of resistance" was sprayed over "Allah, Muammar, Libya and that's all," a chant that Gaddafi supporters used to sing during the eight-month revolt.

NTC leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil addressed those concerns during a speech on Sunday to mark Libya's liberation from 42 years of one-man rule, urging national reconciliation and respect for the rule of law.

"I call on everyone for forgiveness, tolerance and reconciliation. We must get rid of hatred and envy from our souls. This is a necessary matter for the success of the revolution and the success of the future Libya," he said.

But for now the mood in Sirte is one of revenge.

Sitting on a pile of rubble outside his house, another Sirte resident, who declined to give his name said: "There is something burning inside me here," pointing to his chest. "I want to take my weapon and go to Misrata."

Locals believe NTC fighters deliberately used excessive force during battles with Gaddafi supporters holed up in Sirte to punish its residents for their support of the former leader.

"Yes, Muammar is dead, but it is true what he said, they are rats, when the destruction is like that, they are rats," shouted another angry resident. "They are terrorists, not revolutionaries".

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