

Report: Gadhafi Seeks Way Out

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A journalist in Tripoli taking a picture of arms that a Libyan government official said were captured from rebels. **Tara Todras-Whitehill**

TRIPOLI, Libya — Moammar Gadhafi is sounding out the possibility of handing over power, Kommersant reported Tuesday, but the Libyan government denied that it was in talks about the veteran leader stepping down.

Five months into a conflict that has embroiled NATO and become the bloodiest of the Arab Spring uprisings, there has been a flurry of reports about talks on Gadhafi ending his 41 years in power in exchange for security guarantees.

Kommersant based its story on a high-level source in Moscow. But the report was denied in Tripoli, and Italy expressed skepticism.

"Information about negotiations about Gadhafi stepping down or seeking a safe refuge inside or outside the country is simply untrue," Libyan government spokesman Moussa Ibrahim said.

"Gadhafi is not negotiable. This is our position of principle, and the future of Libya will be

decided by Libyans. Gadhafi is a historical symbol, and Libyans will die to defend him," Ibrahim said.

Despite the talk of a peace deal, the fighting between government forces and rebels continues. A Reuters reporter in Misrata, 200 kilometers east of Tripoli, said rebel positions in the Dafniya district on the city's western outskirts came under heavy artillery fire on Tuesday.

The bodies of five rebel fighters were brought into Misrata's al-Hekma hospital. Medical workers there said 35 fighters had been wounded.

Many of them were in critical condition, and some would need to have limbs amputated, staff at the hospital said.

Some analysts say Gadhafi is starting to contemplate an exit plan as shortages of cash and fuel, the NATO bombing campaign and rebel military pressure shorten the odds of him being able to hold onto power.

But Western diplomats caution that it is in Gadhafi's interests to send out conflicting signals about possible deals in the hope that it will sow confusion among the rebels and the fragile Western alliance trying to push him out.

Kommersant said Gadhafi was sounding out the possibility of a way out. "The colonel is sending signals that he is prepared to relinquish power in exchange for security guarantees," it quoted what it called a high-level source in the Russian leadership as saying.

The report came a day after Russia hosted South African President Jacob Zuma — who has tried to broker a peace deal for Libya — and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen for talks that focused on Libya.

After his return from Sochi, Zuma's office issued a statement saying he had asked NATO to persuade the rebel National Transitional Council to come to the negotiating table.

"The meeting was very successful, and I am confident that it will contribute significantly to reaching a solution that will bring peace and stability in Libya," the statement said. "We requested NATO to assist ... [in persuading the National Transitional Council] to remove some of the preconditions that are making it hard or impossible to start with the negotiation process."

On Monday, the Libyan government said it held talks in Italy, Norway and Egypt with senior figures in the opposition about finding a peaceful way out of the conflict.

But the Italian government denied any talks had taken place on its soil and expressed skepticism that Gadhafi's administration was sincere about talks.

"I think it is sort of a propaganda action by Gadhafi's regime, it is a sign of weakness, they try to legitimize themselves by saying that talks are under way," said Italian Foreign Ministry spokesman Maurizio Massari.

"And the aim of Tripoli's people, Tripoli's regime is to drive a wedge within the coalition ... in a moment of weakness. So I interpret this false information as an act of weakness,

a demonstration of weakness of Gadhafi's regime."

Libyan government spokesman Ibrahim said Monday that the Italian government was mistaken. He said he could not reveal the identity of the Italian government member who attended the talks "for diplomatic reasons."

NATO initiated its bombing campaign in March after the United Nations Security Council authorized the use of all necessary means to protect civilians who, inspired by revolutions neighboring in Tunisia and Egypt, rose up against Gadhafi.

Gadhafi says the rebels are armed criminals and al-Qaida militants. He has called the NATO operation an act of colonial aggression aimed at stealing Libyan oil.

Rebels control the eastern third of Libya, as well as pockets in the West, and NATO says its strikes are gradually eroding Gadhafi's hold on power. But the rebels have so far failed to make a breakthrough and advance on Tripoli.

Western powers want a swift resolution.

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