

TAKING LIBYA-TIES

AS SchNEWS GETS AN EYEWITNESS REPORT FROM LIBYA

Medyan Daireh, a Brighton-based Al Jazeera journalist who has previously covered conflicts in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Turkey and Kosovo (see www.schnews.org.uk/features) has just returned from a stint in Libya. He covered the uprising against Colonel Gaddafi, spent weeks living with the rebels and visited all of the rebel-controlled areas. SchNEWS took the opportunity to get his views on the rebels' struggle and the situation in Libya:

Who are the rebels? Are they different factions or are they a unified group? How much popular support do they have?

The people who started the revolution in Libya are called the 'Youth coalition of February 17th'. The rebels are first of all civilians; such as doctors, workers, engineers, solicitors, teachers, imams. They are from all classes within Libyan society. They do not have a clear political direction because of the political repression to which they've been subjected for the last forty-two years. Gaddafi, and sometimes the Western press, accuses the rebels of being part of Al Qaida. There is no Al Qaida there, and no other groups, only rebels.

There are various different groups of rebels, but they are mainly divided not on political lines, but rather because of lack of communications. All the people in Libya support the rebels and help them in practical terms in all possible ways. Some Libyans even gave the rebels their cars. The resources of the revolutionaries and of the National Council are very limited, but people support them as much as they can.

How are they organising? Are they only organising militarily, or politically and institutionally as well? Is it centralised in Benghazi or dispersed?

The rebels are very different and the leaders find it difficult to organise them. Being a fairly recent group (two months old), they still lack organisation, in spite of the new leadership trying to improve the situation. Most lack any military training and weapons among them are scarce.

There is also another issue - you have the rebel groups and the military council. The latter were former members of Gaddafi's army, but left the Colonel and joined the revolution. They have military experience and radio devices to communicate. Both groups hold talks and work together. Just now I was told by the Military Council that both groups are under one leadership. They have also agreed to strictly prevent the very young and the very old joining the fighting. The Libya National Council is the institutional face of the rebels, and is supported by all rebels. Benghazi is the centre, and represents the leadership. Other towns have committees of the council.

What is life like in the rebel-controlled areas? How far has the state receded and what has replaced it? How does this compare with life in Gaddafi-controlled areas?

The rebel-controlled areas enjoy good security. Up to now the people do not trust the police because of their role against the revolution. At the moment the National Council is setting up a new police force with a new name and new uniform, to make them more acceptable to people. Since the beginning of the revolution the schools have been closed. Most work places are not functioning. Some towns, constantly shelled and attacked by the Gaddafi's forces, have in large part been abandoned. However, food, medicines, and now even petrol are ready available. The Libyan National Council is replacing the state. Ordinary citizens have organized themselves to provide civil services on a voluntary basis. They are strongly united in everything. By contrast, in the Gaddafi-controlled area you have long queues to get basic food and petrol.

How do they feel about the NATO intervention? What are their feelings about outside help in general?

When the UN resolution for the no flight zone was passed, it was midnight in Libya. People could not sleep from the relief and kept celebrating. However the initial enthusiasm was greatly reduced by NATO's perceived insufficient bombing of Gaddafi's forces. This lack of NATO determination hindered the rebels' advance. Moreover, the rebels lack proper weaponry and ammunition, some of them having only binoculars or a sword. In spite of this, as I witnessed, they have still managed to conquer towns like Ajdabiya. The rebels want more serious NATO attacks on Gaddafi's forces, more weapons and better communication. Gaddafi, on the other hand, has very sophisticated weapons and 'grad' rocket launchers.

How much control over the country does Gaddafi retain? What remains of his state institutions and security forces?

Gaddafi still controls Tripoli and some areas in the west of the country. He also faces internal dissent that is only starting to shape now, even in the capital. His army is mainly made up of mercenaries from different countries such as Niger, Chad, Mali, Colombia, Mexico, and other poor countries. I have met some soldiers captured by the rebels. Some of them told me that they have been in Gaddafi's army for three or four years. The CIA and other secret organizations in Europe must have known this for quite a while but have kept silent.

How strong is his military? Who are they and how have they been acting?

I was present during the Ajdabiya battle. Gaddafi's forces had organised a siege at the entrance of the town. I witnessed an official from Ajdabiya approaching the rebels and announcing to them that Gaddafi's forces were ready to surrender. The rebels refused to accept because of dissent among Gaddafi's forces. The following day at 11am, 140 men from the rebels attacked Gaddafi's forces and surrounded them in spite of

THE PEOPLE ARE WITH ME...



MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN...

the rebels' poor weaponry, such as kalashnikovs, RPG-7s and some heavy machine guns. By 3pm Gaddafi's army had run away. Many soldiers fled without their tanks and weapons and without taking the injured with them. The rebels captured four soldiers, one Libyan and three from Chad. The ground was full of weapons and military uniforms left behind. Gaddafi's forces fight from a distance but seem not to relish it face to face.

What about the role NATO is playing? What do you think their intentions and objectives are?

Many believe NATO's participation is insincere. The rebels believe that NATO is deliberately prolonging the conflict whilst they'd like to finish it quickly. In spite of this, the rebels are ready for a long fight. They are the youth which started the revolution for a free and independent Libya. They don't favour having any NATO soldiers or other foreign intervention on the ground. They have rejected even volunteer fighters from the Arab world. They told me that they have been patient for 42 years, so they can fight for longer.

How do you think the conflict will develop?

I think that it will be a long struggle, because the rebels insist that they do not want any foreign intervention on the ground. NATO meanwhile is searching for somebody to back for leadership who will support American and Western objectives in the region, but the rebels are unwilling to accept any such compromise forced on them.

According to what I saw on the ground, I can't believe that NATO is looking to get rid of Gaddafi unless they find a suitable replacement.

SOUTHERN CLIMES

After the controversy (ahem) surrounding the dissolution of Climate Camp UK (see SchNEWS 761 - or not if it's a touchy subject for you), Sussex activists are aiming for the "resurrection of the insurrection" with the South Coast Camp for Climate Action.

Running from Easter weekend through to the May Day celebrations, the camp will take place somewhere on the Sussex South Downs. There will be workshops in direct action skills from tripod use to climbing run by activists from a host of campaigns and activists including Smash EDO, SolFed and UK Uncut. The location and exact dates will be announced nearer the time.

* See www.brightonclimateaction.org.uk

ED-F OFF

Anti-nuclear protesters blockaded all four lanes of the A302 outside EDF headquarters in Grosvenor Place, London, during Tuesday (11th) morning's rush hour, declaring it a "nuclear disaster area". Despite the greenwash advertising, campaign group Boycott EDF say the energy giant is pushing for a "nuclear renaissance" which could see no less than ten new nuclear reactors built in the UK. Activists used 14ft tripods to block the road, which runs alongside the gardens of Buckingham Palace. On can only hope Liz and Phil got an eyeful as they ate their cornflakes...

* See www.boycottedf.org.uk

MEXICO: GRAVE SITUATION

On April 6th, Mexican authorities uncovered a mass grave of some 59 people at the La Joya ranch, San Fernando. Over the next few days more and more bodies surfaced; at the time of writing 120 bodies had been discovered. Men, women and children have been found in several pits. Amongst the corpses are those of two girls, bound together and shot in the head. These bodies were discovered in exactly the same place where 72 Central and South American migrants were killed in a mass execution in late August last year.

The dead are almost undoubtedly victims of the Zetas cartel - one of the bloodiest in a bloody business, having learned their trade as Mexican special forces in the USA's very own 'School of the Americas' (see SchNEWS feature 'Grim Up North'), before deciding to go independent.

Judging by the varying states of decomposition of the victims, some have been recently killed while others have been dead for over a year. Somehow the investigations into last year's massacre didn't quite get round to checking the rest of the ranch for bodies. It is suspected that they were all kidnapped from buses that travel the North-South highway through the state of Tamaulipas to the US border. In this massacre, just like last year's, they were most likely killed for either refusing to work for the cartel (as drug mules or as low-level narcos), or failing to pay ransom money.

Back in August when the bodies of the 72 migrants were found, the government faced a major diplomatic backlash from neighbouring countries whose citizens had been killed. This time round the government was quick to point out that there was no need for alarm; all the dead were Mexican. The head of state security, Jaime Canseco Gomez, stated that he knew that the victims were all Mexicans because (in his own words) "None of them had tattoos." This was said in the first few days following their discovery, before a single corpse had been identified. A day later the first two victims were identified by (you guessed it...) their tattoos. Anytime the Mexican government says anything with a degree of certainty you can assume it is either lying or just plain wrong. So far the dead include at least one Guatemalan and one US citizen.

The forensic investigation looks like it might take some time. Despite the huge number of dead (quite likely the largest mass grave in the Americas since the 'dirty wars' of Central America during the '80s) there are only four pathologists working the case. The city of Matamoros, where the bodies have been taken, has literally run out of morgue space.

The Victoria-Matamoros highway (one of the major Mexican routes) has become a no-go area. Bus services are suspended as companies cannot guarantee the safety of their staff or passengers. Those who have money travel by air, and those who don't are trapped in their cities. And the official response is depressingly ambivalent - authorities could only confirm that two buses had 'disappeared' during the last few months, but that maybe another one or two buses had also gone missing. If the authorities can't keep track of buses (and their passengers), what hope is there for families looking for missing relatives? Over 200 family members have arrived in Matamoros looking for lost loved ones.

Meanwhile the government has announced that it will drastically increase the military presence in the state, which is already some 5,000 strong. The military (Federal police, Marines and Mexican Army) has never been particularly good at stopping crime; blocking roads and shooting kids is more their speciality. They arrive as an occupying force, travelling in convoys, so that the narcos' lookouts can easily keep their bosses forewarned. And that's

when they're not directly involved in the transit and sale of drugs themselves.

Meanwhile, local cops are broadly divided into two types - those who work for the narcos and those who are narcos. The cartels have infiltrated the frontier's police forces so thoroughly that the police that you see patrolling are only concerned with defending cartel territory. Then there are the 'clones' - civilian vehicles painted up to look like police vehicles, driven by gangsters in home-made police uniforms. The latter are relatively easy to spot; cops don't normally carry more than handguns whilst the narcos don't like to leave home with anything less than an AK47.

During the last 4½ years of the suicidally ill-conceived 'war on drug-trafficking', Mexican civil society has been slowly but surely imploding. In the next few days or weeks, prosecutors will drag out the supposed 'perpetrators' of these latest massacres in San Fernando (just like they did for the one in August). These suspects, bruised, battered and tortured into confession, will be banded before the press as proof of a crime solved. They may have had nothing whatsoever to do with the massacres, or they may be the lowest of the low in the Zeta hierarchy. What is for certain is that the government won't be looking higher up the food chain for those who really profit - the bankers and politicians who launder money and take their cut of the drug trade's billions.

BENEFIT OF DOUBT

Yesterday (14th) saw the 3rd National Day of Protest Against Benefit Cuts, with demos in over fifteen cities centres up to Scotland and back. In Glasgow and London, demos also happened outside the 'health-care assessment centres' of private French consultancy company Atos Origin, charged with (and charging for) booting people off incapacity benefit. Their numbers were swelled by some of the disabled claimants facing the unsubtle Atos benefit review; a doctor-less questionnaire and 'computer says No-oo' process, heavily criticised by the Child Poverty Action Group and others as unfair and not based on medical opinion (er, no, being based as it is on taking £2.5bn off the poor to pay for bailing out the rich).

However, plans to stamp on peoples' benefits aren't going to ComDem plans: it's worth remembering that in Scotland, success rates in appealing Atos decisions to throw people off the sick is very high - particularly for those taking legal advice. The Edinburgh Council's Rights Office has been successful for 8-9 out of every 10 appeal tribunals they've been involved in, while the Citizens Advice Bureau say that 40% are successful, rising to 70% for those with legal advice.

* In **Glasgow** the demo was followed by an impromptu but spirited invasion of the nearby *Daily Mail* offices. See www.thecrutchcollective.blogspot.com

* For more on the demo in **Islington, London**, see www.demotix.com/news/657903/anti-cuts-demonstrators-picket-atos-healthcare

SOCIAL CENTRE PLUS

An occupied social centre in a disused Job Centre in Deptford saw off its first eviction attempt on Tuesday (12th). Renamed the Social Centre Plus, it has been squatted for over a month in protest against the cuts - with meetings, film nights and other community activities aplenty.

The bailiffs who turned up at the site to turf them out made a swift exit within five minutes, having seen a crowd of 30 people demonstrating outside. The building's owner was granted permission in court to forcibly remove the occupiers at the end of March, so more eviction attempts look likely in the future.

* See <http://socialcentreplus.wordpress.com>

INSIDE SchNEWS

Activists are planning a week of action for **Jock Palfreman**, an Australian jailed for murder in Bulgaria following a confrontation with fascist thugs in 2007 (see SchNEWS 738). Jock appealed against his conviction in court hearings late last year and early this year but despite mounting evidence of judicial incompetence and corruption, his 20-year sentence was upheld.

With Jock's final appeal approaching, supporters are aiming to pile the pressure on the Bulgarian authorities. They are calling out for people to organise actions wherever they can and to bombard the Bulgarian Govt with demands for justice. For more information on how to get involved, plus details of who to direct your protests towards (including a sample letter) see www.anarchistsolidarity.wordpress.com

* For Jock's full story see www.freejock.com

Iranian political, social and human rights activists are trying to instigate an international campaign to prevent the execution of **Shirkou Moaarefi**, a young Kurdish political prisoner. They are hoping to spark demonstrations, protest and publicity in Iran and internationally. Moaarefi is due to be hung on May Day.

* See www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_192889200748656 for details or contact Kawah2000@gmail.com

UK campaigners are organising a rally in Brixton against the scheduled execution of journalist, author and activist **Mumia Abu-Jamal**, who has been languishing on death row for three decades. A global icon for justice and human-rights and the focus for a worldwide campaign against the death penalty, Mumia was arrested for the murder of a policeman in 1981 and convicted in proceedings riddled with racism, ineptitude and corruption (see SchNEWS 584). Mumia's legal team is currently embroiled in a legal battle to get a new trial.

Activists will be assembling on April 23rd at 1pm in Windrush Square to march through Brixton. A demonstration will also be held outside the US Embassy when the court's decision is announced. For further information contact Tongogara on 07597078221

PARTY & PROTEST
For events listings updated weekly see
www.schnews.org.uk/pap

...and finally...

GE WHEEZE: Those cheeky Yes Men (see SchNEWS 744, 686, 569) have been up to their naughty tricks again, this time targeting the US's largest corporate conglomerate, General Electric (GE).

Already under-fire for admitting that it's paying bugger all tax due to losses made by its casino-banking financial arm during the credit crisis, the company was left smouldering with anger after news organizations swallowed a fake GE Press Release and started reporting that the company was donating a \$3.2bn tax refund back to the government.

This all led to a lot of unwelcome attention and even dented the share price before the hoax was unmasked and a denial PR offensive helped it recover. Which all goes to make cynical SchNEWSers wonder whether the Yes Men are really a clever front for a bit of predatory short-selling. That'd be one hell of a way to pay for some media activism come to think about it...

* See <http://theyesmen.org>

Disclaimer

SchNEWS advises all readers, after the Arab Spring, we're hoping for an Indian Summer. Honest.

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