



MAKING GROUND:
Revolutionary forces
outside Sirte

More gains made in Gaddafi strongholds

LIBYA'S revolutionary forces seized a convention centre that had served as a key base for fighters loyal to Colonel Gaddafi in the fugitive leader's hometown, as they squeezed remaining regime loyalists in the besieged coastal city. The inability to take Sirte, the most important remaining stronghold of Gaddafi supporters, more than six weeks after anti-Gaddafi fighters seized the capital, Tripoli, has stalled efforts by Libya's new leaders to set a timeline for elections and move forward with a transition to democracy. Gaddafi supporters also hold the inland enclave of Bani Walid, where revolutionary forces also reported key gains after weeks of faltering advances. The transitional leadership has said it will declare liberation after Sirte's capture. Libya's de facto leader, Mustafa Abdul-Jalil, head of the governing National Transitional Council, said he expected both cities to be seized within a week - although previous predictions have not been met.

Road to recovery for Libya

Ambassador focused on rebuilding

By Michelle Sutton

LIBYA'S ambassador to the UAE says social media is one of the tools his countrymen are using to rebuild Libya and bring the former regime to justice.

Dr Aref Ali Nayed said facebook, twitter and blogging were becoming tools for transparency in Libya.

"People will report any mishaps they see on facebook and social media, which is good," he told 7DAYS, adding that such sites were helping to transform the country after years of corruption and were a useful tool to help the special committee hunting for former leader Colonel Gaddafi.

However, Nayed maintained that his fellow countrymen still need to tread carefully: "The only problem is sometimes it's not always of consistent quality, the information... like in all police work, false leads also take up a lot of time."

Nayed said he is now meeting many Libyans in the UAE who are coming to the consulate for the first time, and his current focus is assisting them and helping to put his country back together.

"We have had many visitors who said they never visited the consulate before because it was reporting on them, sending information back to the Libyan regime."

"That was part of the normal functioning of all Libyan embassies and consulates, they were

keeping tabs on residents everywhere," he said. "People have been massively traumatised and healing the nation is our top priority. This healing is multi-dimensional; the physical healing of the wounded, the psychological healing of the traumatised and the healing of the country's infrastructure."

Helping lead the UAE's Libya Stabilisation Team, the former Tripoli resident said he had already witnessed change in his people since liberation in August, adding: "Back home, people are so fed up with corruption, everybody is keeping everybody else honest and transparent."

Back on the ground in Libya, the Stabilisation Team has been taking an advisory role after control was handed back to ministries following six months of intense work and humanitarian aid distribution.

And Nayed expects the swift transformation will continue, led by the Libyan people.

"I think the Libyan people will demand a very urgent transformation of their lives in key areas, number one is medicine. We have massive needs from the war injures not just physical, but trauma related also," he said.

"There will be a lot of need for therapy and healing and physiotherapy for thousands of people."

He expected an assessment outlining the needs of the Libyan people would be released within a month.

michelle.sutton@7days.ae

'Merchant of Death' finally faces US court

FOR nearly two decades, Viktor Bout ruled an empire of the air. He dispatched a private fleet of long-haul cargo planes that spanned the globe, shipping heavy machinery, frozen chickens and more. One of his bases was in Sharjah, and Bout claims his UAE cargo operation was used for importing African flowers into the Emirates.

But the Russian businessman faces trial this week in a New York federal courtroom for what Western governments insist was his real speciality - arranging delivery of weapons that inflamed violence across the world's war zones.

Bout is known as the 'Merchant of Death', the nickname long used by American and international officials to describe his suspected prominence in the illicit arms trade. He has been banned from international travel for violating United Nations arms embargos, targeted by a US asset freeze and he inspired the role of the fictitious arms trafficker played by Nicholas Cage in the 2005 action film 'Lord of War'.

He is also believed to have amassed a fortune estimated as high as \$6 billion. His clients, according to official investigations, included African dictators Colonel Gaddafi, Charles Taylor and the Taliban mullahs

who once ran Afghanistan. Bout, 44, eluded arrest until US narcotics agents lured him to Thailand in a 2008 sting operation, charging him with conspiring to sell anti-aircraft missiles and other weapons to undercover informants

posing as South American terrorists. Protesting his innocence, Bout was extradited to New York in November after enduring a grueling, two-year limbo in a Bangkok prison. Jury selection starts today.



IN THE DOCK:
Viktor Bout in custody

Toll rises after shootouts

CLASHES between Syrian soldiers and army defectors and a shooting at a funeral have killed at least 17 members of the military and 14 civilians, the latest sign of the militarisation of the uprising against President Bashar Assad's regime, a human rights group said. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the latest fighting took place on Sunday in the northwestern province of Idlib, the central province of Homs, and the southern village of Dael. The activist group said the shooting continued yesterday. The uprising against Assad's regime began in mid-March. Assad has reacted with deadly force that the United Nations estimates has left 2,900 people dead. "The situation has been terrible since yesterday," said a resident of Homs, where the observatory reported at least seven civilians were killed on Sunday.

Visa ban for Iranians over human rights

THE European Union has expanded sanctions against Iran because of continued human rights abuses. A meeting of EU foreign ministers added 29 officials linked to the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the list of people facing a visa ban and asset freeze. British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the measures aimed to increase pressure on Iran to improve "its appalling human rights record".