

# THE UPRISING IN LIBYA

## *Introduction*

### **Focus**

This CBC *News in Review* story focuses on the popular uprising in Libya against the 40-year reign of leader Moammar Gadhafi. The uprising has sparked a violent civil war and a military response from other countries, including Canada.

The winds of revolution that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in the early months of 2011 suddenly reached Libya in mid February. Unarmed protesters, emboldened by the success of similar uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, took to the streets demanding the end of the leadership of Colonel Moammar Gadhafi and his replacement by a democratic government. It quickly became apparent that Gadhafi would not yield to the demands of the protestors, as he ordered his secret police and elite military units to quash the uprising.

For their part, the rebels—who were now armed with weapons captured from Gadhafi’s troops—were able to consolidate their position in the eastern city of Benghazi and spread their armed rebellion westward toward Tripoli, Libya’s capital city and the seat of Gadhafi’s power. Many were killed as Gadhafi’s men brutally slaughtered the rebels. Many of Gadhafi’s troops were killed, too.

The uprising also spawned a huge humanitarian crisis as hundreds of thousands of people—mainly foreign workers in Libyan oil fields—fled the violence and overwhelmed the borders of neighbouring Tunisia. International relief agencies struggled to cope.

The world watched in admiration as the brave but poorly armed and ill-trained rebel forces stood their ground against Gadhafi’s vastly superior military machine. In the initial phases of the uprising, the rebels pushed Gadhafi’s units from a number of important centres in both the eastern and western parts of the country. Meanwhile, Gadhafi’s denunciations of the rebels became increasingly shrill and almost incoherent, alleging among other things that they were supporters of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda and that they were intoxicated with alcohol and drugs. Despite the high morale of the rebel forces, they soon found themselves outgunned and losing ground. By mid-March Gadhafi’s forces were poised to strike at the gates of the opposition stronghold of Benghazi, where he had vowed he would show “no mercy” to its inhabitants.

It was at this crucial point in the Libyan crisis that the international community finally decided to act. Right from the beginning of the rebellion, world leaders had called upon Gadhafi to stop using force against his people and leave office immediately. When these demands went unheeded, and with a bloodbath looming in Benghazi, the United Nations on March 17 passed a resolution authorizing a no-fly zone to be imposed on Libya. This would prevent Gadhafi from using his superior air power against the rebels and unarmed civilians. The U.S., France, Britain, and other countries—including Canada—were soon launching air strikes against various military positions inside Libya while the rebels took advantage of this new development to push back against Gadhafi’s army in towns where they had earlier been forced to withdraw. But with the UN resolution expressly ruling out the deployment of foreign ground troops, the rebels appeared to be facing a long uphill struggle in their quest to defeat Gadhafi.

## To Consider

1. Do you think Western countries, including Canada, have a duty to become involved in the Libyan crisis, or is it none of our business? Explain.

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### Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. What are Libya's two most important natural resources?

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2. When did Gadhafi come to power in Libya?

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3. What actions did Gadhafi take in the 1970s and 80s to anger Western countries such as the United States?

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4. What happened in Libya in February 2011? How did Gadhafi respond to this?

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5. What warning did Gadhafi's son give to the rebels fighting against the regime?

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6. How have Libya's oil exports been impacted by the fighting?

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7. What action did the United Nations authorize regarding Libya on March 17, 2011?  
Why did it take this step?

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8. What accusations has Gadhafi made against the countries participating in the military actions against his regime?

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9. What military assets has Canada contributed to the fighting in Libya? What has been their role in the operation so far?

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10. What questions have been raised in Parliament regarding Canada's participation in military operations in Libya?

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### Key Facts

Libya is a vast but sparsely populated country in North Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea on the north, Egypt on the west, Tunisia and Algeria on the east, and Chad and Niger on the south. Its total land area is 1.77 million km<sup>2</sup>, making it the fourth-largest country in Africa. However, its population is only 6.5 million and is mainly concentrated along the northern coast. The two largest cities are Benghazi in the east, and Tripoli, the capital, in the west.

Most Libyans are a mixture of Arab and indigenous North African Berber and Tuareg peoples, sometimes known as the “Blue Men” of Africa because of the light blue robes they favour. Arabic is the official language, and most Libyans belong to the Sunni branch of the Islamic faith. Libya is the only African country besides Algeria and Nigeria that possesses large reserves of oil and natural gas. The oil is of very high quality, requiring little refining, and is mainly exported to European countries such as Italy.

### **Did you know . . .**

Libya controls approximately four per cent of the world's total petroleum supplies.