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Violent End to an Era as Qaddafi Dies in Libya

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MISURATA, Libya — Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's last moments Thursday were as violent as the uprising that overthrew him.



Libyan government fighters celebrated after routing the last remaining forces loyal to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi from the coastal town of Surt on Thursday.

In a cellphone video that went viral on the Internet, the deposed Libyan leader is seen splayed on the hood of a truck and then stumbling amid a frenzied crowd, seemingly begging for mercy. He is next seen on the ground, with fighters grabbing his hair. Blood pours down his head, drenching his golden brown khakis, as the crowd shouts, "God is great!"

Colonel Qaddafi's body was shown in later photographs, with bullet holes apparently fired into his head at what forensic experts said was close range, raising the possibility that he was executed by anti-Qaddafi fighters.

The official version of events offered by Libya's new leaders — that Colonel Qaddafi was killed in a cross-fire — did not appear to be supported by the photographs and videos that streamed over the Internet all day long, raising questions about the government's control of the militias in a country that has been divided into competing regions and factions.

The conflicting accounts about how he was killed seemed to reflect an instability that could trouble Libya long after the euphoria fades about the demise of Colonel Qaddafi, who ruled Libya for nearly 42 years and is the first of the autocrats to be killed in the Arab Spring uprisings.

At the same time, the flood of good news for the former rebels prompted a collective sigh of relief and quieted talk of rivalries, as strangers congratulated one another in the streets.

For weeks, as the fight for Surt, Colonel Qaddafi's hometown and final redoubt in the eight-month conflict, reached a bloody climax, NATO forces and Libyan fighters had watched for an attempt by his armed loyalists to flee and seek safety elsewhere. Soon after dawn, they did, leaving urban bunkers in the Mediterranean town and heading west, said a senior Western official in Europe knowledgeable about NATO's operations in Libya.

Around 8:30 a.m. local time, a convoy slipped out of a fortified compound in Surt, the scene of one of the civil war's bloodiest and longest battles and a city that was on the verge of falling to Colonel Qaddafi's opponents.

Before the convoy had traveled two miles, NATO officials said, it was set upon by an American Predator drone and a French warplane. With the attack the convoy "was stopped from progressing as it sought to flee Surt but was not destroyed," Defense Minister Gérard Longuet of France said.



Only two vehicles in the convoy were hit, neither carrying Colonel Qaddafi, a Western official said. But the rest of the convoy was forced to detour and scatter. Anti-Qaddafi fighters rapidly descended on the scene, telling Reuters they saw people fleeing through some nearby woods and gave pursuit.

A field leader in Surt, who gave his name to Al Jazeera television as Mohammed al-Laith, said that Colonel Qaddafi fled from a Jeep in the convoy and dived into a large drainage pipe. After a gun battle backed by his guards, he emerged. Mr. Laith told Al Jazeera that the former Libyan leader had a Kalashnikov in one hand, a pistol in the other.

"What's happening?" he quoted him as asking as he came out.

The video on Al Jazeera shows Colonel Qaddafi wounded, but clearly alive. The network quoted a fighter saying that he had begged for help. "Show me mercy!" he was said to have cried. There was little of that, in the video at least.

One fighter is seen pulling his hair, and others beat his limp body. Two fighters interviewed by Al Jazeera said someone had struck his head with a gun butt.

Omran Shaaban, 21, a Misurata fighter who claimed to have been the first, along with a friend, to find Colonel Qaddafi, said he was already wounded in the head and chest and bleeding in the drainage pipe and then whisked away to an ambulance. Precisely how he died after that, Mr. Shaaban said, was unclear.

By all accounts, he was then taken in an ambulance to Misurata, a coastal town to the west that fought perhaps the most ferocious battle against Colonel Qaddafi's government and whose fighters still celebrate their reputation for martial prowess.

Holly Pickett, a freelance photojournalist working in Surt, reported in a Twitter feed that she had seen Colonel Qaddafi's body in an ambulance headed for Misurata, along with 10 fighters inside with him. It was unclear from her posts whether he was dead. "From the side door, I could see a bare chest with bullet wound and a bloody hand. He was wearing gold-colored pants," she said in one post.

Within an hour of the news of Colonel Qaddafi's death, Libyans were celebrating. "We have been waiting for this moment for a long time," Mahmoud Jibril, the prime minister of the Transitional National Council, the interim government, said. "Muammar Qaddafi is dead." He was speaking at a news conference in Tripoli. Mahmoud Shammam, the council's chief spokesman, called it "the day of real liberation. We were serious about giving him a fair trial. It seems God has some other wish."

At least one of Colonel Qaddafi's feared sons, Muatassim, was also killed on Thursday, Libyan officials said, and there were unconfirmed reports that another, Seif al-Islam, had been captured or wounded.

The Arab Twittersphere lighted up with gleeful comments, many of them hinting at a similar fate awaiting other Arab dictators who have sought to crush popular uprisings — most notably President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. One of them, also referring to former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and former President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, read: "Ben Ali escaped, Mubarak is in jail, Qaddafi was killed. Which fate do you prefer, Ali Abdullah Saleh? You can consult with Bashar." Another was more direct: "Bashar al-Assad, how do you feel today?"

No videos or photos appeared to show Colonel Qaddafi alive after the ambulance spirited him away from Surt, though there was a debate over who exactly was responsible for his death. NATO never claimed the airstrike killed him, and some officials of the Transitional National Council made clear he died at their own hands.

A reporter accompanying Ali Tarhouni, the interim government's oil and finance minister, who visited Misurata to view the body, saw Colonel Qaddafi splayed out on a mattress in the reception room of a private home, shirtless, with bullet wounds in the chest and temple and blood on his arms and hair. Three medical officials arrived, presumably to conduct more forensic tests. News agencies quoted a spokesman for the council in Benghazi as saying a doctor had

examined Colonel Qaddafi's corpse in Misurata and found he had been shot in the head and abdomen. The shot to the head was visible in photos that followed.

A remarkable feature of the Arab revolts is the degree to which almost every incident is documented, usually by cellphone camera images. They are almost instantly fed to the Internet and satellite channels, or ferried by e-mail.

A flurry of images followed Colonel Qaddafi's death. In one, broadcast by Al Jazeera, his body is half-naked, bleeding on the pavement. Even more dramatic is a video posted on YouTube. Celebrating fighters surround his corpse, which appears to have been washed. Clearly visible is a gunshot wound to his forehead.

A forensic pathologist in New York, Dr. Michael Baden, said in observing the photos that there were as many as two bullet wounds and possibly four in Colonel Qaddafi's head. From what he saw, he believed the shots were fired at fairly close range.

"It looks more like an execution than something that happened during a struggle," said Dr. Baden, a former New York City medical examiner. "Two pretty identical-looking wounds like that would have been hard to do from a distance."

Late into the night, Libyans celebrated Colonel Qaddafi's death, as did some elsewhere in the Arab world, seeing it as a lesson to autocrats in Yemen and Syria. "It is a historic moment," said Abdel Hafez Ghoga, a spokesman for the Transitional National Council. "It is the end of tyranny and dictatorship. Qaddafi has met his fate."

Western leaders who helped the anti-Qaddafi fighters throughout the conflict also hailed Colonel Qaddafi's demise.

"We can definitely say that the Qaddafi regime has come to an end," President Obama said. "The dark shadow of tyranny has been lifted, and with this enormous promise the Libyan people now have a great responsibility to build an inclusive and tolerant and democratic Libya that stands as the ultimate rebuke to Qaddafi's dictatorship."

But occasionally voiced in the Middle East was unease at the violence of the moment, the fact that a bloody revolution ended with yet more bloodshed. "It's not acceptable to kill a person without trying him," said Louay Hussein, a Syrian opposition figure in Damascus. "I prefer to see the tyrant behind bars."

Kareem Fahim reported from Misurata and Tripoli, Libya; Anthony Shadid from Beirut, Lebanon; and Rick Gladstone from New York. Reporting was contributed by Denise Grady and J. David Goodman from New York; and Eric Schmitt, Mark Mazzetti and Robert F. Worth from Washington.