

Report from Africa by Mary Lalevée

Qaddafi threatened by coup

Ordered to invade neighboring Tunisia, part of the air force tried to bomb the Libyan dictator's residence instead.

Libyan plans to invade one of the United States' closest allies in Africa, Tunisia, received a setback on Aug. 31, when Libyan officers refused to accept orders to start reconnaissance flights over Tunisia.

Al Ahram, the Egyptian newspaper, reported on Sept. 2 that a serious mutiny in the Libyan air force took place at dawn on Saturday, Aug. 31, led by Col. Mohammed el-Barghash, commander of the El Wabia air base near the Tunisian border, and Col. Khalifa Khedr.

The officers were reported to have attempted to bomb Qaddafi's residence rather than prepare to invade Tunisia.

Sources have confirmed that the mutiny was a "serious threat" to Qaddafi, and reported that several of the 43 officers arrested had been trained in Tunisia. One source said that the Libyan army is "furious" about the way Qaddafi is building up his so-called Revolutionary Committees, as a power-base against the army. Qaddafi is reported to have described the army as a "traditionally stupid institution," in a statement at the end of August.

Qaddafi's campaign to destabilize and/or crush Tunisia militarily includes the expulsion of over 20,000 Tunisian workers from Libya, his threat of invasion which saw 25,000 Libyan troops mass on the border on Aug. 22, and assorted terrorist actions inside Tunisia.

On Sept. 4, Tunisian Prime Minister Mzali, speaking at a rally in support of the expelled workers, respond-

ed by announcing the recall of all Tunisian workers from Libya. There are still over 60,000 Tunisian workers there. Mzali announced that all commercial relations with Libya were being broken.

He revealed in the course of his speech that a group of Libyan terrorists armed with explosives had been captured, and would shortly be displayed on Tunisian television.

Following two weeks of virtual silence from Tunisia's allies, support is now being publicly expressed from various quarters. Algerian President Chadli Benjedid personally paid a surprise visit to the Tunisian town of Monastir for a meeting with President Bourgiba on Sept. 2. He assured Bourgiba that his country "would always stand at Tunisia's side, in all circumstances," according to the Tunisian news agency. A Tunisian military delegation, led by the head of the army chiefs of staff, visited Algiers the same day for talks with their Algerian counterparts.

The Algerian President chose to visit Tunisia less than 24 hours after Qaddafi's threats to "unite the Arab world" by force if necessary, in a speech on the 16th anniversary of his coup. Qaddafi was thus clearly warned that Algeria would not remain passive were Tunisia attacked.

Yasser Arafat's number-two in the PLO, Abu Iyad, also announced support for Tunisia in a statement on Sept. 2 in Tunis. The PLO, he declared, "stands at Tunisia's side" in the conflict with Libya. He criticised Libya's

expulsion of foreign workers.

The United States sent its naval chief of staff to Tunisia at the head of a delegation which was received by Bourgiba on Sept. 4. No communiqué has yet been issued, and it is not clear whether the "even-handed" position that the United States has so far adopted has been changed. To date, the State Department has only said that the United States respects the "territorial integrity" of both Libya and Tunisia.

By his choice of where to give his 16th anniversary speech on Sept. 1, Qaddafi made clear his intentions to broach the "territorial integrity" of several nations. The speech was made, not as usual in Tripoli with a military parade, but in Sebha, the desert town where Qaddafi grew up, and a key crossroads of the Sahara. The desert tracks which lead west to Niger and Mali have become known as the "Qaddafi trail," and lead also to Tindouf in Algeria. To the south, tracks lead to Tibesti and Chad. Sebha, according to *Le Figaro*, is the "departure point for the colonel's Saharan ambitions." The surprisingly modern airport is crowded with MiG-25s, Il-ouchine-76s, and Marchetti SF-260s. It was the base for Libyan air penetration of Chad.

Qaddafi called for the strengthening of the Revolutionary Committees, for the extension of their activities abroad, for the Arab world to unite "by force if necessary," and for Syria to annex Lebanon. The foreign dignitaries present at the event were equally indicative of his ambitions. In the place of honor, at Qaddafi's right, was his candidate for President of Chad, Goukouni Oueddei. Also present were George Habash of the PFLP, Ahmed Jibril of the PFLP-GC, anti-Arafat PLO leader Abou Moussa, Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood leader Sadeq el Mahdi, and Sudanese Information Minister Bechir Hasnid.