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Subject: Problems With Logistics, Coordination and Rivalries Hamper Libya's Rebels (NYT)

KIKLA (New York Times) — Ahmad Harari, a Libyan rebel fighting to overthrow Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, recounted how he was almost killed last week.

He was part of a small group of fighters assigned to defend a front-line position in Qawalish, a village in Libya's arid western highlands. Then Colonel Qaddafi's military attacked, rushing forward in pickup trucks.

Mr. Harari said he had only 18 cartridges for his rifle, roughly the same amount of ammunition carried by everyone in his group. Within minutes he ran out.

"Every man lost all of his bullets and tried to escape," he said. A friend was captured, killed and mutilated, he said, but the others managed to get away.

While the Libyan rebels have carved out an enclave in the west, the dearth of ammunition in Mr. Harari's group points to one of the continuing drains on their military strength — an absence of coordination, even on matters as basic as making sure that ample ammunition is provided to the front-line fighters.

As Libya's uprising-turned-desert-war enters its sixth month, the rebels in the mountains have assembled into small bands of local fighters. These groups — often named for the towns the fighters come from — have demonstrated both an eagerness to fight and a willingness to work with almost anyone who can help them reach their goal of ousting the Qaddafi family from power.

But coordination between them, as well as logistical support from their higher commands and foreign supporters, has not developed in important ways. In eastern Libya, the rebel authorities talk of making a national army; here in the west, the state of official disorganization makes the prospects for such a force unlikely in the near term.

Interviews with dozens of rebels present a portrait of a guerrilla force that acts less like a coherent structure than a network of pickup fighting clubs.

Groups share common goals but are undermined by local rivalries. Orders from the senior regional command are followed arbitrarily, including, in Qawalish, orders not to loot. Information flows only partly up and down the chain of command.

Many fighters say they suspect others of hoarding weapons and ammunition, and withholding essential supplies. And when they fight, the different groups can move haphazardly about the battlefield, each according to its own will, while the senior commanders — many of the former officers in Colonel Qaddafi's army — remain far back, out of harm and sight.

Some former pro-Qaddafi officers have declined to participate in the fighting, the rank-and-file rebels say, making the chief value of these defectors their political significance, not how they can influence the direction of a bitter, village-by-village ground war.

One fighter from Gharyan, one of the cities held by Colonel Qaddafi's forces that is now in the rebels' sights, described the Gharyani fighters' request to a defector, an air force colonel, to lead them to reclaim their homes.

"We asked him to be our commander," said the fighter, Ziad, who requested that his last name be withheld to protect his family. "He said, 'No, the only thing I know is office jobs.' And we don't have a commander yet."

The rebels in the mountains cut across many boundaries, and often the composition of their units breaks through distinctions in class, ethnicity and tribe. Side by side in fighting groups are university students and their professors, laborers and accountants, lawyers and petroleum engineers. In one group, an air traffic controller worked beside a lecturer from Gharyan University's faculty of law.

Few of these men claim to have had any military experience before taking up arms this year.

Considering their circumstances and backgrounds, their tactical success has been remarkable. The impoverished population began the war with few arms with which to fight a conventional force, yet the rebels, aided by NATO air power, have chased Colonel Qaddafi's soldiers from much of Libya's highlands.

Many villages on the high plateau today are independent of Colonel Qaddafi's rule. Some, like Jadu, are also safe enough that families who had fled the fighting have returned.

But there is also a strong sense among these men that what is behind them, from a military perspective, was not as challenging as what lies ahead, and that their low level of organization may add to the difficulties.

Politically and socially, many of the villages captured thus far were strongly anti-Qaddafi. But many of the towns and cities on the roads to Tripoli, the capital, have split loyalties. A few tilt in favor of the Qaddafi clan.

Intertribal grievances have become a visible factor, too — which could make the fighting fiercer and more widespread.

And tactically, the approaches to some of the cities lie across the open desert, where the rebels could find themselves more vulnerable to the Qaddafi garrisons' artillery and mortar fire.

Moreover, as Colonel Qaddafi's forces have suffered attrition, they have seemed to rely more on land mines to defend their positions, a menace that could drive up rebel losses when they move forward.

With the holy month of Ramadan set to begin in early August, and daytime desert temperatures often climbing above 100 degrees, the pace of fighting has slowed. The duties of many groups are often as simple as rotating through daylong shifts watching over the front.

But these shifts offer insights into the weakness of the rebel command.

Rebels from Yafran standing duty at the front line on Monday said that their fighting group had fewer rifles than men, and when they were assigned to front-line duties they were issued a rifle for one day that they had to

return to their base the next. They are also issued little ammunition.

And tellingly, in more than two weeks of interviews with fighters, not one said he had seen the rifles and machine guns France has said it supplied to the rebels in the spring. Each man said his rifle had been scavenged from the battlefield. Many wondered who among their leaders had kept or withheld the guns.

The shortages are a drag on the rebels' strength. Before the recent battle for Kikla, the rebels said they had more than 200 fighters, but only 89 military rifles and limited ammunition. "We have belief," said Ibrahim Suraya, the leader of the local civilian council. "This is our gun."

The mountains are awash with bravado, and many fighters echo such statements. God is with us, they say. Victory or death, others add. Still, others wonder why there is enough ammunition to fire in long bursts at funerals in the cities, but not enough for battle.

Jamal Akhmad, a 52-year-old petroleum engineer waiting with younger men for the next battle, was looking for more than slogans. He spoke calmly and without bitterness as he shared a front-line soldier's view. His complaint was as old as revolution and war.

"People get comfortable, sitting in their chairs, and they forget about the people," he said. "Even this is true of our own committee."

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