

RELEASE IN FULL

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**From:** Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Saturday, September 17, 2011 2:45 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** Fw: Updates details of fighting at Bani Walid and Herawa (Reuters)

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**From:** OpsNewsTicker  
**Sent:** Saturday, September 17, 2011 02:43 PM  
**To:** NEWS-Mahogany  
**Cc:** SES-O  
**Subject:** Updates details of fighting at Bani Walid and Herawa (Reuters)

BANI WALID/SIRTE, Libya, Sept 17 (Reuters) - Libyan interim government forces charged back into the besieged desert town of Bani Walid on Saturday, a day after diehard loyalists of Muammar Gaddafi beat them back into a humiliating retreat.

Forces loyal to the new authorities were also battling Gaddafi loyalists on the streets of the ousted leader's home city Sirte. After days of battles, they celebrated the capture of the town of Herawa 60 km east of Sirte, but have made only slow progress against heavy resistance in Sirte itself.

Nearly a month since they drove Gaddafi's forces from the capital Tripoli, interim government fighters are bogged down in sieges of Gaddafi loyalists' remaining redoubts, raising doubt over whether they can quickly unite the country.

Gaddafi's spokesman said the ousted leader was still in Libya and leading resistance. Moussa Ibrahim also accused NATO of killing 354 people in an overnight bombing of Sirte, an accusation that Reuters could not independently verify. The alliance said such accusations in the past had been false.

A column of National Transitional Council (NTC) pickup trucks mounted with anti-aircraft machine guns and fresh ammunition rushed into Bani Walid as dusk fell, after Gaddafi forces shelled a checkpoint, Reuters reporters there said.

"Gaddafi forces attacked the checkpoint so our troops went in. There is a lot of fighting inside the city right now," senior regional NTC official Abdullah Kenschil said.

The day before, NTC fighters seeking to capture Bani Walid had beat an embarrassing retreat under withering fire.

In Sirte, NTC forces have entered the city from the west and captured nearby Herawa to the east, but have not been able to dislodge tenacious Gaddafi fighters.

Ibrahim, the deposed leader's spokesman, contacted Reuters by satellite telephone to say Gaddafi was still in Libya, leading the "resistance" against his foes.

"We will be able to continue this fight and we have enough arms for months and months to come," he said.

He said NATO air strikes on Sirte had hit a residential building and a hotel, killing 354 people. More than 700 people were wounded and 89 were missing from that bombing, he said, giving a total death toll for 17 days of more than 2000 killed.

There was no way to verify the account, as pro-Gaddafi-held parts of the city were inaccessible. NATO has repeatedly denied in the past that its bombing -- authorised by the United Nations to protect civilians -- has killed large numbers of civilians.

"We are aware of these allegations," Colonel Roland Lavoie, spokesman for the Western military alliance, said in Brussels. "It is not the first time such allegations have been made. Most often, they are revealed to be unfounded or inconclusive."

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