

AFRICA

U.S. Senate Delegation Offers Praise and Caution to Libya's New Leaders

By KAREEM FAHIM and RICK GLADSTONE SEPT. 29, 2011

TRIPOLI, Libya — Four Republican senators visited Tripoli on Thursday, the most prominent official American delegation to travel to the Libyan capital since the fall of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's government more than a month ago, and they said the former insurgents who toppled him were inspiring activists in Syria, Iran and even China and Russia.

But they cautioned, as well, that the proliferation of post-Qaddafi militias here represented a potential threat. The delegation, led by Senator John McCain of Arizona, also said American investors were watching Libya with keen interest and wanted to do business here as soon as the Transitional National Council, as the interim government is known, had pacified the country and routed the vestiges of resistance by Colonel Qaddafi and his fugitive loyalists.

The senators said they had raised the delicate subject of prosecuting the unpunished Libyan perpetrators of the Lockerbie bombing with the post-Qaddafi government, and were told it was ready to cooperate. The 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killed 270 people, most of them Americans, during a period of Colonel Qaddafi's rule when Libya was considered a pariah state.

The senators touched down in a country celebrating the toppling of Colonel Qaddafi but also struggling to find its way. The former rebels have been unable to defeat Qaddafi loyalists in the cities of Surt and Bani Walid and have moved slowly to exert control over civilian militias that have claimed parts of Tripoli.

The battlefield deadlocks have aggravated a leadership crisis that broke out into the open on Thursday, when Libya's embattled prime minister, Mahmoud Jibril, appearing at a rare news conference, seemed to dare the interim government to fire him.

Speaking to reporters in Tripoli, Mr. Jibril, who has been under attack for weeks by rivals, including some who complained he spent too much time out of Libya, denounced his critics. "If there were groups or people that do not see Mahmoud Jibril as fit or they don't want him, that's totally up to them," he said.

"The only power on this ground is the power of the transitional council," he said, referring to the interim government. "I'm not going to keep it a secret from you that they will do me a favor if their opinion was heard and I was relieved of this duty."

Even as he declared he would not serve in the government once the whole country was liberated, Mr. Jibril tried to strengthen his government's legitimacy, announcing millions of dollars in payments to Libyans, including the families of fighters killed in the conflict and people still on the front lines.

There were unconfirmed reports that anti-Qaddafi fighters near Surt had captured Moussa Ibrahim, Colonel Qaddafi's spokesman. Mr. Jibril said he hoped the news was true.

The Congressional delegation, including Senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois and Marco Rubio of Florida, toured Martyrs' Square, known as the Green Square during Colonel Qaddafi's four decades in power.

Mr. McCain and Mr. Graham visited Tripoli as part of another Congressional delegation in August 2009, when their attitude toward Colonel Qaddafi was much different. According to a confidential diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, they met with Colonel Qaddafi and one of his sons, Muatassim, who is still on the run,

and discussed Libya's counterterrorism efforts and its cooperation in dismantling its nuclear program. Mr. McCain "described the bilateral military relationship as strong," the cable said.

On this visit, they met with former rebel officials, military commanders and fighters, and toured a prison. At an afternoon news conference, the senators mostly offered praise for the revolutionaries, saying they had "inspired the world."

Mr. McCain, an early supporter of Western military intervention in the conflict, hailed the Libyan sacrifices and, at times, played down the impact of NATO's anti-Qaddafi bombing campaign. "This is Libya's revolution, not ours," he said. "You deserve all the credit for its success, and you are responsible for its future."

Mr. McCain said that he felt confident about a plan to secure weapons caches left unguarded during the conflict and that he did not think Libyans were "interested in any radical extremist government."

He cautioned the transitional government, which has been criticized for the rebels' harsh treatment of African migrants and black Libyans over the course of the seven-month conflict. "It's also important to bring this war to a dignified and irreversible conclusion, to bring Qaddafi and his family and his fighters to justice, while ensuring that past wrongs do not become a license for future crimes, especially against minorities," he said.

Kareem Fahim reported from Tripoli, and Rick Gladstone from New York. Alan Cowell contributed reporting from London.

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