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Can You Hear Libya Now?

By DAN GONZALES and SARAH HARTING

Washington

AS Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi tightens his grip on the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and the millions of people trapped inside, the world is debating how it can help the opposition, including no-flight zones and air strikes.

But there's a less aggressive, though perhaps even more important, step we can take: ensuring that Libyans can communicate with the outside world.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and communications devices like camera-enabled cellphones have been important tools for protesters in the revolutions that are rocking Arab countries. This is particularly true in countries like Libya that lack opposition political parties or even formal opposition movements, requiring protesters to build communications networks literally overnight.

Perhaps that's why, since the Libyan demonstrations started last month, Internet access and cellphone service in Libya has severely deteriorated — the work, many suspect, of the government, since Colonel Qaddafi's son Muhammad runs the country's satellite and cellphone communications companies. Huge portions of the population are now frequently unable to complete cellphone calls or gain access to the Internet.

Loyalists to Colonel Qaddafi are also reported to have confiscated cellphones or deleted photographs on them to prevent the spread of images from the uprising.

As a result, democracy demonstrators have had a harder time communicating with one another, while foreign correspondents in Libya have found it nearly impossible to report on events fully.

Colonel Qaddafi and his loyalists, meanwhile, can use the military communication networks they control to counter rebel forces.

Fortunately, there is an easy step the United States and its allies could take to help: deploying cellphone base stations on aircraft or tethered balloons. The calls could then be routed to Navy ships equipped with satellite communications terminals.

Base stations are small and cheap. Indeed, this kind of portable system, though not used, was already available in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and in the years since the hurricane, the equipment has shrunk even further.

Ideally, a commercial cellphone operator would provide direct access to its network, and either the operator, the American government or the international community could foot the bill.

What's more, establishing such a network would present minimal risk to pilots, who could loiter safely over the Mediterranean and still provide coverage to the coast, where the overwhelming majority of Libyans live and where most of the fighting is.

It's true that such a communications system would require military protection. But because only a small number of communications aircraft would have to be defended, the size of the protected zone would be small — much smaller than the no-flight zones imposed on the Saddam Hussein regime after the gulf war.

Moreover, the effort would give the international community a flexible starting point in case further intervention is necessary, whether to engage with the Libyan military or provide assistance to refugees.

By ensuring that Libyans maintain access to these basic services, the United States and the rest of the world would not only assist in the overthrow of Colonel Qaddafi, but they would also send a strong message of support to those elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa fighting for their voices to be heard.

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