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FROM THE
DIRECTOR OF
THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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Libya Offers Controlled Tour of NATO Bombing Sites in Tripoli

By JOHN F. BURNS

TRIPOLI, Libya — Taken at face value, the official Libyan account of an overnight NATO bombing attack on Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's leadership compound in the heart of Tripoli was wrenching — an example, as the Libyans told it, of NATO's "barbarity" toward Libyan civilians and the West's utter lack of concern for international "morality."

NATO, Libyan officials said, had dropped one of three bombs that struck the compound in the early hours of Thursday within 150 feet of a children's playground in a parkland corner of the sprawling Bab al-Aziziya compound. Two other bombs, they said, had fallen randomly deeper into the compound, damaging roadways and administrative buildings of no military significance.

As if to make the point more starkly, reporters arrived at the playground site to find children swirling about enthusiastically on a fairground carousel no more than a stone's throw from the main crater left by the bomb. Some of the children were waving portraits of Colonel Qaddafi.

Not more than 100 yards away, reporters were led past a tented camp for refugees, including men, women and children from sub-Saharan Africa, many of them gathered, with the encouragement of accompanying government minders, to chant the praises of Colonel Qaddafi as a background chorus to the reporters' visit.

Officials said 3 people were killed and 27 others were wounded in the bombings of the leadership compound in southern Tripoli, all of them civilians. They named the dead as two Libyan reporters and a guide who was accompanying them to "celebrations" of an unspecified nature that were being held in the park at the time.

That people should have been in the area at 3:30 a.m., when huge blasts from the bombings shook the otherwise deserted districts of central Tripoli, was not unusual, the officials said, since Libyans were a nocturnal people who often gathered at that hour.

Moussa Ibrahim, the Qaddafi government's chief spokesman, called the attacks a further example of NATO spending "billions of dollars on death," in the latest instance "in front of a children's playground."

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“People are being killed every day, every night, and nobody is reporting this,” he said. “NATO is enjoying a conspiracy of silence.”

But acting as a sort of truth squad in weighing the authenticity of the Qaddafi government’s accounts of the bombings is an essential part of the job description for foreign journalists, and the notion of reporters lingering in a children’s playground in the pre-dawn hours was not the only element in the official story of the compound bombing that raised serious doubts.

There was, too, the fact that the three huge water-filled bomb craters shown to the reporters, and other features close by, appeared to point to the real target of the bombings as being a vast network of underground bunkers running for a half a mile or more beneath the compound — a network that is believed to have been well known, for years, to Western intelligence agencies tracking the largely clandestine life of Colonel Qaddafi.

The other features that pointed to an attack on the compound’s subterranean tunnels and bunkers included bomb fragments strewn around the craters that indicated that they came from bunker-busting, 2,000-pound bombs that were used by American aircraft in the attack on Baghdad in 2003, according to a Western security adviser accompanying one of the television crews who said he was familiar with the bombs.

Also, smaller craters at the bomb sites were tangled with what appeared to be the punctured wreckage of massive concrete and steel structures reaching deep underground, and at least one large aboveground ventilation shaft. Close to the children’s playground, there was a concrete stairway descending to a steel door, flanked by green-painted steel railings.

An official determination to disguise the stairway’s presence was betrayed by what appeared to have been a carefully marshaled gathering of a crowd of protesters around the stairway, and a frenzied push forward by the protesters whenever a reporter or a camera crew approached to get a closer view.

If the NATO bombings were intended to destroy parts of the underground complex, they amounted, in practice, to another attempt to destroy what NATO officials have described as the “command and control structures” of the Qaddafi government — to all practical effect, to kill Colonel Qaddafi himself.

The bomb that struck near the playground was only 150 yards or so from the building that was hit in a 1986 American bombing attack ordered by President Ronald Reagan. That building is now a memorial and the attack is believed to have persuaded Colonel Qaddafi to build the underground complex at the compound. Security experts reached after the bombing said that placing a children’s playground over an entry-point to the subterranean complex might have been one of the measures adopted by Colonel Qaddafi’s security advisers to deter bombing attacks on a crucial part of the complex.

In the case of the attacks in the small hours of Thursday, reporters were taken by bus to a hospital that

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received casualties — and at least two badly burned and blasted bodies — before dawn. By noon, reporters were back aboard the bus for the visit to the sites of three huge bomb craters inside the Bab al-Aziziya compound, which has been the principal stronghold of Colonel Qaddafi, his family and top government officials for decades.

The Qaddafi government's calculation has been that showing the buildings blasted by the bombs, and emphasizing the impact on the civilian population of this city of 2 million, is the most promising way to erode public and political support for the NATO air campaign.

The choreography of Thursday's visit to the compound appeared to have been fashioned to meet the political needs of the moment. One element was the presence of African refugees, some of whom said they were from Chad.

The Qaddafi government's treatment of African refugees from the conflict has been an issue of growing concern, with humanitarian organizations claiming that some of the refugees have been forced at gunpoint aboard boats leaving Tripoli's harbor for Europe, and that one of the boats, carrying several hundred passengers, sank with heavy casualties shortly after embarking.

Officials also tried to deflect the blow to morale from the rebels' seizure of the airport in Misurata. Mr. Ibrahim delivered a second denial of the news during the tour on Thursday. "They are losing their mind, they are hallucinating, because they can see they are losing," he said, referring to Western nations that have hailed recent rebels successes at Misurata as a portent of the rebels' eventual ability to prevail in the war.

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