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Franciscans in Tripoli holed up as battle rages

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ROME -- Church sources who could be contacted said some Catholic leaders remained holed up in Tripoli as the battle for control of the capital raged around them.

Late Aug. 22, three Franciscan friars were barricaded in their home in a Tripoli neighborhood, where there was heavy fighting, the source told Fides, news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

"No one dares to walk in the street because people are shot on sight, even if it is not clear who shoots whom. Of course, it is dangerous for civilians to leave the house," said the church source, who requested anonymity.

"Currently, the phone lines are cut and we cannot contact the friars," the source said, but the last thing the friars said was that they could not leave the house because of the shooting nearby.

The situation of the Catholic community in Benghazi is better and calmer, Fides reported Aug. 23. The church continues its pastoral activities and "there have not been particular difficulties encountered with the new authorities," the source said.

Earlier Aug. 22, a source told Fides that the situation on the streets was "a disaster."

"We do not know how the situation is evolving because leaving the house means risking one's life," said the source, who asked to remain unnamed for security reasons.

The rebels have been fighting to wrest power from dictator Moammar Gadhafi for about six months. They launched their offensive on the capital the night of Aug. 19.

"Many fear a bloodbath," the source said. "While part of the population has left town, many of those who have remained are in the situation 'wait and see.'"

On Aug. 22, the head of Libya's rebel forces, claiming they had taken the capital, said dictator Moammar Gadhafi had tried to scare people by saying that Islamic extremists were part of the rebel movement.

Mustafa Abdel-Jalil called on all Libyans to respect the lives of others and urged the rebels to show they world that Libya is a country of "religiously moderate" people.

"Moammar Gadhafi will be remembered and his period of rule through the acts that he committed against the rebels and the world," he said.

"But God has chosen that Gadhafi's end should be at the hands of these youths, so that they can join the Arab Spring that is going around the Arab nations. And now I say with all transparency that the era of Gadhafi is over," he said.

In February, a Franciscan priest who has worked in Libya for seven years told Catholic News Service that

Christians were afraid Islamic fundamentalists would take over the country if Gadhafi fell. He said that, under Gadhafi, Christians had been protected.

Libya is a Muslim country, with Christianity restricted mostly to enclaves of foreign workers, many of whom were evacuated earlier this year.

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