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Rebel Libya Finance Chief Hunts for Funds and Hope

Kuni Takahashi for The New York Times

"I'm sick and tired of this. We literally have days before the lights are off," said Libya's rebel finance minister, Ali Tarhouni, center, meeting with supporters in Benghazi.

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A tanker of diesel fuel had to be paid for, and oil fields needed protecting. A youth group wanted help avoiding eviction from their building and a blind woman just wanted to be reassured that everything would be all right.

For hours on Sunday, Libya's rebel finance minister, Ali Tarhouni, fielded requests and juggled crises during a dash of a day that slowed only when he demanded a few minutes to himself, to smoke a cigarette in the garden of his office by the sea. In a city that feels leaderless and adrift, Mr. Tarhouni is often looked to not only as finance minister, but as a shoulder to lean on, a sympathetic ear. And he may be most effective in that capacity: Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's opponents say they are flat broke.

For months, the NATO airstrikes have

kept the rebel movement breathing by preventing its fighters and stronghold here from being overrun by Colonel Qaddafi's troops. But Mr. Tarhouni said that without a quick infusion of funds, they may soon be left in the dark. He said if the Qatari government, the rebels' largest financial backer, did not "come to our rescue" by paying for diesel fuel now sitting out of reach in a tanker off the coast, the electricity in Benghazi would be cut by midweek.

"I'm sick and tired of this," he said, explaining legal hurdles that have kept the rebels from receiving pledged funds. "We literally have days before the lights are off."

As manager of the rebels' finances, Mr. Tarhouni is among the most critical players in the movement trying to overthrow Colonel Qaddafi, an effort that gains broader international recognition by the day. He has established himself as a pragmatic, and occasionally audacious, leader, who in the early days of the uprising ordered the rebels to rob a branch of the central bank in Benghazi where they found the equivalent of more than \$320 million.

"Basically, we drilled holes," Mr. Tarhouni said, explaining how they opened the safe.

AMONG opposition leaders, Mr. Tarhouni occupies a unique place. As an economics professor with a populist streak, he bridges a divide between the technocrats who have returned from exile or remain abroad, and home-grown academics and former Qaddafi government officials. He is blunt when describing the rebels' desperate straits, using expletives to talk about donors lagging in their payments. At the same time, Mr. Tarhouni, who abruptly took a leave from his job teaching economics at the University of Washington to join the revolution, can appear a practiced politician. On a recent tour of the Benghazi courthouse, the emotional heart of the Libyan revolt, he was busy shaking hands and posing for pictures with children.

But his primary focus is on finding money, and that has not been easy, not since the rebels robbed the bank. An effort to secure loans from the United States backed by frozen Libyan assets has foundered. "I had two meetings with the Treasury. At the end of the day, they were not productive from my way of looking at things," he said.

And Mr. Tarhouni, the son of a Benghazi merchant, has also been unable to tap Libya's oil wealth. After attacks on oil installations by Colonel Qaddafi's soldiers in April, oil production was either stopped or slowed, a distinction the rebels have refused to clarify. Mr. Tarhouni said that full production would not resume until the facilities were secure, but also that the rebels had ruled out hiring mercenaries to guard them.

Talking about that decision, Mr. Tarhouni sounded a note of caution rarely heard from his movement, which at times has seemed willing to make almost any deal necessary to remove Colonel Qaddafi, and is almost entirely reliant on foreign powers to keep it in the fight.

"I'm not about to start the Iraqi thing," said Mr. Tarhouni, whose office has been besieged by visits from private security companies. He was also cautious in reacting to an apparent offer of amnesty for Qaddafi officials made over the weekend by Mustapha Abdul Jalil, the chairman of the rebel Transitional National Council - another attempt to quickly end the conflict. The language of the offer was confusing, but Mr. Abdul Jalil seemed to suggest that officials who defected now - regardless of what they had done - would be forgiven by the rebels.

Mr. Tarhouni said the issue was more complicated. Some people deserved amnesty, but others, especially with "blood on their hands," should be held accountable, he said.

Mr. Tarhouni's political activism started when he was in college, first in Benghazi as an undergraduate and later during graduate studies at Michigan State University. His classmates in Michigan included Moussa Koussa, who went on to become one of Colonel Qaddafi's closest allies. As the Qaddafi government started executing student activists in the mid-1970s, Mr. Tarhouni remembered that he and other Libyan students had to twist Mr. Koussa's arm to sign a letter "that basically said Qaddafi was a murderer." Mr. Koussa shocked the Qaddafi inner circle when he defected in late March.

MR. TARHOUNI met his wife, Mary Li, a lawyer who works for the Washington attorney general, while they were both students in Michigan. Mr. Tarhouni is on unpaid leave from the University of

Washington, and his family, including four children, are still in the United States. One of his sons plans to join him here soon, and Mr. Tarhouni said he planned to put him to work.

On a recent Sunday, his daily hunt for money started early, about 8:30 a.m., in a 1930s Italian villa where Mr. Tarhouni keeps his office. He and about 10 aides sat with laptops at a long wooden conference table, figuring out who should deal with the tanker, and how to coordinate payments to cities in the west, under attack by Qaddafi soldiers and desperately in need of money and the ship's fuel.

"I have areas that are besieged, people that are dying every day, and I can't help them out," he said. "I'm not sure that this simple, straight message is reaching our friends." Envoys from the United States and France visited his office, and left, with no answer to his problems. About 4 p.m., he disappeared to try to take a nap, but an aide woke him as soon as he removed his shoes. Later, at a news conference, he urged foreign governments to send money, showing emotion but also a talent for brinkmanship.

Later, touring a youth center in a former government security building, he asked the young activists about their monthly finances and spoke frankly about his inability to help. "Unfortunately, we're bankrupt," he said. Later, in his car on the way back from visiting a local businessman doing charity work, he fretted about the tanker.

"I'm watching a clock," he said. "I need \$90 million."

It is hard to tell what role Mr. Tarhouni and the other rebel leaders will play in the future. They have said they would not run in an election that would follow Colonel Qaddafi's leaving power, but could run in subsequent campaigns. At the same time, their self-appointed roles have given them broad visibility and recognition in a country with few well-known political leaders.

In the evening, walking through the streets by the courthouse, Mr. Tarhouni was mobbed by people who knew him from television or remembered his YouTube appearances during the uprising, when he appealed to Colonel Qaddafi's soldiers not to fire on protesters.

As he walked, he remembered the vibrant city he left behind in 1974: the coffee shop where he and his friends talked excitedly about the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser and the theater where he saw the region's best performers, like the singers Fairuz and Abdul Halim Hafez.

But the city he saw was a neglected shell.

The work of the revolution had made such reflection difficult. "The longer it takes," he said, "the more you have to remind yourself what it's about."
