

Hillary Rodham Clinton: 'I am proud to stand here on the soil of a free Libya'

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Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton traveled to the Libyan capital on Tuesday, bringing encouragement and millions of dollars in new U.S. aid to a transitional government struggling to consolidate control over a country ravaged by dictatorship and civil war.

Clinton arrived in Tripoli just after noon, becoming the first cabinet-level U.S. official to visit the country since autocratic leader Moammar Gaddafi was driven from the capital nearly two months ago.

She met with top officials of the Transitional National Council and was also slated to address a town hall-style gathering during a five-hour visit steeped in both security and symbolism.

"I am proud to stand here on the soil of a free Libya," Clinton told leaders of the interim government. "This is Libya's moment. This is Libya's victory and the future belongs to you."

Aides said Clinton would privately reassure Libyan leaders of continued U.S. support as the country grapples with myriad challenges, ranging from restoring basic services to rounding up thousands of missing surface-to-air missiles.

The talks were expected to focus on "how we set the table for a long-term, completely different partnership between the United States and Libya that is deep and broad," a senior State Department official told reporters traveling with Clinton's entourage.

Clinton brought with her a modest increase in non-military aid, which has totaled more than \$130 million since the start of the Libyan uprising. The State Department is boosting funds and staffing to help Libyan officials recover and destroy conventional weapons from Gaddafi's arsenal, including thousands of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that have gone missing amid the chaos of recent fighting.

Clinton also was expected to announce new funding to help Libya provide long-term medical care to some of the country's estimated 15,000 war wounded.

The trip comes against a backdrop of continued fighting in a few areas of the country still held by Gaddafi loyalists. In addition to the hold-out city of Sirte — Gaddafi's birthplace and a hotbed of Gaddafi support — supporters of the former leader have engaged the transitional army in gun battles in the Libyan capital as recently as the weekend.

Meanwhile, the question of Gaddafi's whereabouts, and his fate, remained both a mystery and a menace, U.S. officials acknowledged.

"He is still providing a lethal nuisance factor that is a distraction for many Libyans," the senior State Department official said.

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