

WASHINGTON POST
23 April 1984

Hangings in Tripoli Focus Attention on Libyan Dissent

By Bob Woodward
Washington Post Staff Writer

TRIPOLI, Libya, April 22—A week ago today the Student Revolutionary Committee, which ensures that Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi's revolutionary principles are scrupulously adhered to among Tripoli University's 27,000 students, announced that two students would be publicly hanged for treason.

Some officials at the Foreign Ministry here and elsewhere interviewed this week voiced disbelief and shock that the students would actually carry out the severest of sentences on their peers. Thousands of students—3,000 to 18,000, depending on whom you talk to—demonstrated last Sunday in support of the planned execution.

The next day, according to officials and witnesses, gallows were constructed, one next to a 10-by-20-foot portrait of Qaddafi at the entrance to the university, and the two students in their twenties were brought out before thousands in the student body and publicly hanged in a revo-

lutionary spectacle. Some students vomited and ran off shrieking, according to witnesses interviewed this week.

The hangings were reported to the anti-Qaddafi movement in Europe, and Libyan Foreign Ministry officials reluctantly acknowledge that the reports contributed to the anti-Qaddafi demonstration the next day at the Libyan embassy in London during which a policewoman was shot dead and 11 others injured. The British say the shots were fired from a window of the embassy.

The hangings and the apparent controversy they created on and off campus caused the Libyan Foreign Ministry to ask the British, in stern requests made in London and here, to prevent the demonstration. Britain let the demonstration take place, however, and the shootings followed.

"Who would have imagined this?" said one Libyan Foreign Ministry official today. The distress is over not just the shooting

and the diplomatic problems, but also over the fact that the linkage between them and the public hangings will inevitably turn attention to what is happening in Libya.

From five days of interviews here it is apparent that not everyone is happy with the state of the 15-year-old revolution in which absolute authority theoretically resides with the people and an array of people's committees, such as that of the students. Under this theory, expounded by Qaddafi, there is no government and all decisions, large and small, are collective people's actions expressing the will of the masses.

In one example of the continuing revolution, Tripoli University was recently renamed the University of the Opening or University of September 1, a reference to Sept. 1, 1969, when Qaddafi started his revolution and took power.

Of the demonstration at the university before the executions, one official said, "From the size of the demonstration you would think the students wanted to hang the traitors. Well, I would say 98 percent opposed and 2 percent favored" the executions.

In a visit today to the sprawling campus, which has an eerie resemblance to American university campuses plastered with posters in the 1960s, questions about the previous week's executions drew icy stares and a few reluctant confirmations.

One was from a fourth-year engineering student who sat on a stone bench in the Agriculture Square where the second gallows stood. The second student who was executed apparently had studied agriculture.

"I did not like it and we are all still talking about it," the engineering student said.

At the Student Revolutionary Committee office, piled with mattresses and debris like a student organization office in the United States, a spokesman openly confirmed the hangings. Speaking through two faculty members, who acted as translators, one student said, "The people have the right to try anyone at any time when they feel someone is out of order, against the revolution."

He continued, "It is very democratic, not hidden. Anyone who comes under suspicion will be tried" in public.

The two faculty members refused to go beyond what any individual student from the committee would say. Questions that went unanswered included: How many are on the student committee? How were the two students tried? By whom were the students tried? Precisely what treason did the executed students commit?

Answers on revolutionary theory, however, were abundant.

"Every day there are more believing," said one student member of the committee. Another added, "Despite the decision to hang him [one of the two executed on Monday], we can prove the revolution is looking for the happiness of the people."

Continued

Among officials in government buildings, the revolutionary fervor is starkly absent. Confirming the public hangings in an interview Friday, Foreign Minister Ali Treiki said only, "Sometimes you need it." He politely waved off all other questions on the hangings and the connection with the London demonstration that had been confirmed by two other officials who asked not to be named.

At the Education Ministry on Saturday, Abdulhafid Zallitali, chairman of the People's Committee on Education, also somewhat reluctantly confirmed the hangings, saying that the two condemned students had been publicly tried by the student committee two or three years ago, perhaps four. He and others gave no explanation for the delay in carrying out the sentences.

In April 1976, Qaddafi launched the student revolutionary movement. Last April students convicted of treason were executed at Benghazi University, the site of student riots in January 1976 in which at least 10 people were reported killed by government forces. Zallitali said last week's executions at Tripoli University were the first there.

He said the two students were involved in a "secret antirevolutionary organization. It could be communist, extreme Moslem fundamentalist or others because we have many of them."

Another official said the two had done or said something directly aimed at Qaddafi, but this could not be confirmed.

Zallitali said the campus revolutionary committee is a volunteer group "that sees that revolutionary principles are explained, and to preserve the principles of the revolution, . . . to fight for the revolution if need be."

Several officials here voiced surprise that the connection between the hangings and the London anti-Qaddafi demonstration had not been more quickly established.

"The hangings were not secret," said one official. They were "witnessed by thousands, known by thousands, talked about by perhaps all—but in a whisper, because of how we feel."

Those feelings, according to two dozen interviews here, apparently range from pride to despair and include much uncertainty.

"You do not understand our system," said another official. "One fanatic and anyone can be gone if he starts the people's will working." This official suggested that the Libyan warning and request that the British prevent Tuesday's demonstration came from a fear here that a lone actor, angry at enemies of the revolution abroad, could not be controlled and might do something not officially sanctioned.

Students who demonstrated last month at the British Embassy here to protest Britain's alleged harboring of anti-Qaddafi Libyans had openly hinted at the possibility of striking out against them. Their statement, broadcast on Tripoli radio at the time, said, "The student masses blame the British government for receiving the 'stray dogs'

[the revolutionary term for anti-Qaddafi Libyans]" stressing that "these persons will be reached by the long arm of the people sooner or later wherever they are."

The hangings apparently were on the do-not-discuss list with Qaddafi.

I had been asking officials all week about the executions and was supposed to attend Qaddafi's press conference here last night but was kept by officials in a hotel with instructions not to leave or make phone calls.

After Qaddafi's press conference, officials insisted there had just been a simple mix-up. Qaddafi was not asked about the hangings at the press conference, according to a transcript.

Speaking of the siege of the British Embassy at that press conference, Qaddafi said something that several officials claimed has broader application: "The Libyan people are very, very angry and I can't restrain them. . . . The Libyan people are free to do what they want when confronted by their enemies."

A well-placed Foreign Ministry official had this cynical explanation for the hangings: "It's to keep the revolution moving forward. Perhaps you will understand it this way. If you put mice in a bag, seal it up and they start to eat their way out, you then shake the bag furiously. When they wake up, they are dazed. They start eating, you shake the bag again. If you keep doing that they will be in there forever and will never get out."

Whatever the hidden controversy in these executions, they demonstrate the power of the revolution. "Revolution was never for the squeamish," said one of Qaddafi's aides, "and the fact is the leader and his principles are stronger, more popular than ever."