

Gadhafi Takes a New Tack

In Appeasing Tones, Libyan Talks to West

By Judith Miller
Special to the Herald Tribune

TRIPOLI, Libya — Colonel Moammar Gadhafi, who has led Libya on a fiercely anti-American and anti-Israeli path for 23 years, has extended an olive branch to the United States and indirectly to Israel in an effort to end the debilitating sanctions imposed by the United Nations just over a year ago.

During a wide-ranging 90-minute interview, the first he has given to an American journalist in more than a year, Colonel Gadhafi did not abandon his refusal to turn over the two Libyans accused of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland. But he stressed his desire to halt enmity between the United States and Libya and to establish good relations with the new Clinton administration.

"We are delighted that the Democrats, our allies, won," the colonel said. "We won't do anything to harm Bill Clinton politically or to annoy him. We want to end the Libyan problem in Bill Clinton's term."

At the same time, Colonel Gadhafi, apparently reaching out to the United States through Israel, made a series of overtures to the Jewish world.

First, he invited all Libyan Jews who were forced to flee after the 1967 Arab-Israel war back to Libya — which he called their country — not only to live, but also to visit. Second, he said he would soon implement a 1970 law providing compensation to Italians and Jews who left property in Libya, much of which has been expropriated. Third, he said Libya would soon host a conference in Tripoli for representatives of the three major monotheistic faiths, an invitation, he added, that would be extended also to Jews coming from Israel. "There will be no limitations," he said. And finally, he said he would permit some 200 Libyans to make a religious pilgrimage to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

He was speaking in his tent pitched in the center of the Bab el Aziziya barracks. He issued a strong condemnation of Islamic fundamentalists, calling those who blow up buildings such as the World Trade Center and assassinate government officials and innocent civilians "mad dogs" and "terrorists," words he once reserved for Americans and their allies. He insisted that he was now cooperating closely with Egypt, Algeria and his Maghreb neighbors to combat the spread of Islamic militancy.

In addition, he made the following points:

• He insisted that Libya had closed camps that the

said. Ronald Reagan was his nemesis and the man who ordered the bombing of his barracks and other strategic sites in Libya in 1986 in response to alleged Libyan terrorism against American citizens abroad.

"Bush followed Reagan's policies," the colonel said. "Bush wanted to do the same to Clinton, to make him his vice president by tying him to his policies and continuing his strategies. One of those strategies was the Lockerbie strategy. If Bill Clinton wants to be independent and to treat Lockerbie independently, if he's really determined not to be Bush's vice president, we must find a way to solve this problem."

Libya, senior Libyan officials said, had offered to try the two men here, to send them to a third, neutral country to stand trial, to try them before the International Court of Justice at the Hague (which lacks jurisdiction in such matters) and lately, to Canada. All of these offers have been rejected. Libya, the officials added, had also sent and received many emissaries from third parties seeking to set up a dialogue with the United States to resolve the conflict. All of this has been to no avail, Libyans and diplomats agreed.

The overture to Israel through the more than 100,000 Libyan Jews who are now Israeli citizens

'We are delighted that the Democrats, our allies, won. We won't do anything to harm Bill Clinton politically or to annoy him. We want to end the Libyan problem in Bill Clinton's term.'

seems aimed at circumventing the impasse on the Lockerbie affair by demonstrating Libya's good faith in resolving other problematic issues, such as its protracted hostility to Israel.

Colonel Gadhafi hinted as much himself. Stressing that he harbored no ill will toward Jews, he said that Libya sought reconciliation with its own Jews, only six of whom still live in Libya, and with all people of the three major faiths, including the Jews of Israel, which he referred to as Palestine. "Were it not for the

West has alleged are terrorist-training facilities, and he invited UN inspectors to come and visit any site they suspect of such activity.

• He expressed concern about the proliferation of nuclear weapons, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and vowed that Libya would never use such weapons of mass destruction against Israel.

• He explained that Libya had refused to sign the convention banning chemical weapons in solidarity with Egypt, which has refused to sign the convention or to permit chemical inspections until Israel opens its doors to international inspection of its nuclear facilities.

• He said that the UN embargo against his country had caused serious damage and had resulted in the deaths of some 157 Libyans, "virtually the same number who died in the Pan Am flight," he added. (A total of 270 people, 11 on the ground, died when Pan Am Flight 103 was blown out of the sky.)

But he vowed that he would not alter his stance on the fate of the two Libyans indicted in the United States in the bombing, even if the price were a continuation of the sanctions, or their extension to oil, which accounts for almost all of Libya's income. "Libya lived for 5,000 years without oil," he said. "It's the Europeans who cannot live without Libyan oil."

Colonel Gadhafi appeared tired and inauspiciously somber. His dark eyes were puffy and ringed by large circles. Known for his eclectic attire and sometimes unpredictable behavior, he remained seated and rather sedate. He wore a Libyan robe, a gray cloak trimmed in gold brocade, and a cashmere scarf around his neck. Speaking in Arabic, he occasionally interrupted his translator to ensure that his meaning was clear and that his words were not mistranslated.

The interview, coupled with discussions with and clarifications from Libyan officials, constitutes what Western diplomats called a distinct departure from the tone and substance of major aspects of Libyan policy. The diplomats also characterized the reaching out to Libyan and other Jews as a surprising shift in the colonel's attitude.

The interview is the most dramatic reflection to date of the colonel's sense of isolation, which has resulted from the embargo and the cutoff of international air travel to Libya.

Libyan officials stressed that the colonel's remarks do not constitute recognition of Israel, nor should they be seen as an intention to open negotiations with Israel. But taken together, they border on de facto recognition of the state that the Libyan regime had long said would eventually disappear from the map of the Mideast. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Libyan leader will follow through on his pledges.

Colonel Gadhafi reserved his most effusive remarks for President Clinton and the Democratic administration. "We were happy about Bill Clinton's success," he said. "We will not create any problems for him. We consider him the savior of the new world, the United States and the Western world."

Libya, he said, had always preferred Democrats to Republicans, since "they represent Indians, minorities and the disenfranchised people in the United States."

"George Bush was Reagan's vice president," he

problem of Palestine," he said, "I would be the first to defend the Jews of the world."

By contrast, he assailed Islamic militants for what he called their misuse of religion to achieve political aims.

"Religious parties are prohibited in Islam," he said. "If these people are in Libya, they will be arrested. They are very dangerous. They call anyone who disagrees with them infidels. They don't accept dialogue. They kill policemen and imams alike, thinking that they'll get to paradise by doing so. They are mad dogs."

Senior aides to Colonel Gadhafi denied that the initiatives to Jews were a cynical ploy aimed at persuading the United Nations to lift sanctions.

Suleiman Shumi, undersecretary for the Maghreb Union, said Libya had long maintained that Jews who fled were Libyan citizens, and therefore, had always been entitled to return or visit. However, no one had done so until February, when Raffaello Fella, president of the Association of the Jews of Libya and now an Italian citizen, came to Tripoli for an unpublicized meeting with Colonel Gadhafi.

Mr. Shumi said the idea of a conference among the three major religions and the plan to act on compensation for Libyan Jews and Italians were agreed upon at that meeting. Since then, Libyan officials and Mr. Fella have been working out the details of both agreements in principle.

Mr. Fella, who visited Libya again this week, said that 3,000 to 4,000 Libyan Jews, most of them now in Israel and Italy, had left property behind, and would be entitled to millions of dollars in compensation.

The conference will be sponsored by the Rome-based Triologue Association, an independent group favoring improved relations among Mediterranean countries, which is headed by the Italian senator and former prime minister Giulio Andreotti. It is to be held in Tripoli, probably in June or July.

Asked specifically whether Israeli citizens would be among those invited, Colonel Gadhafi replied, "There will be no limitations." Similarly, asked whether Libya would permit 200 of its citizens to tour the holy places in Israel, should Israel grant them visas, he said, "They are free to go."

There seems little doubt that Colonel Gadhafi is disturbed by Libya's isolation and the effects of the sanctions, which have made the normally chaotic Libyan economy even more so.

He asserted that he had not abandoned any of the major goals or principles that have guided Libya since the military coup that brought him to dictatorial power in 1969. But he acknowledged that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of the Gulf War, the world had changed.

His regime, guided by his Green Book, a curious blend of utopian slogans and mystical Islam, has endured, while the Soviet Union lies in tatters, he noted. "The Green Book has outlasted the Red Book," he said, flashing the rare smile that once mesmerized many in the Arab world.

Referring to the American-led sanctions campaign, he said, "Each of us has paid a price. Let's close this page and open a new one."