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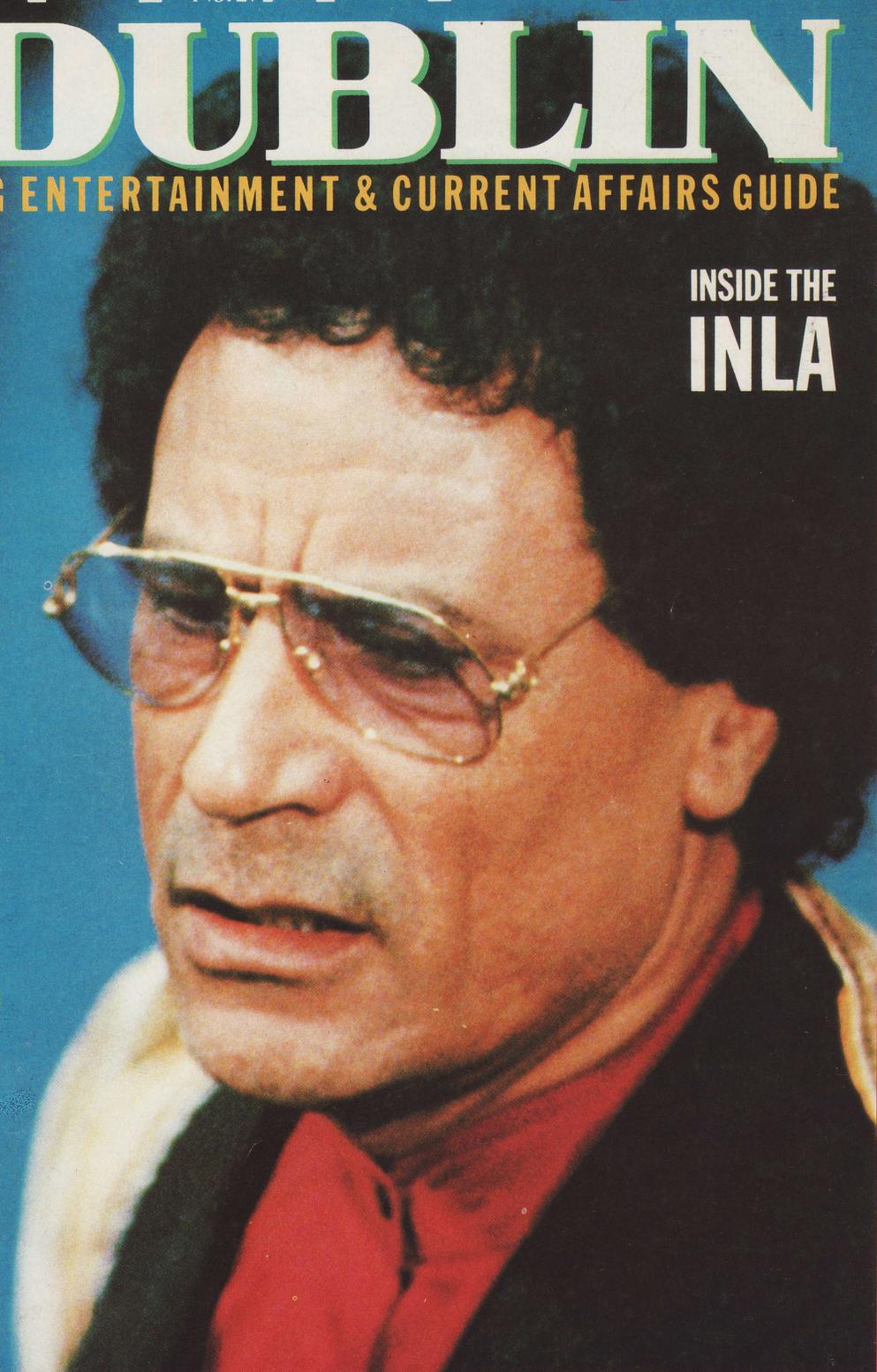
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INSIDE THE
INLA

'REAGAN
IS TURNING
ME INTO A
TIME
BOMB'



The

GHADDAFFI INTERVIEW

By Eamonn McCann

'If the spirit of the present generation prevails in the West they will destroy the world'. Colonel Ghaddafi, Prime Minister and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Libyan Arab Republic, talks to EAMONN McCANN, in this exclusive interview conducted recently for In Dublin and Channel 4's 'Diverse Reports' programme.

FIVE o'clock on a Monday afternoon we are sprawled in the lobby of the El Khebir hotel in downtown Tripoli, producer, director, cameraman, soundman, Piastre Pete and me, wondering what the chances are of the coffee we'd ordered an hour ago arriving before six, and quietly cursing Abdul Latif Bokar for making a hames of the chanting at yesterday's Basic People's Congress, when the tranquillity is undisturbed by the arrival of seven women, all dressed ultra-demure in very Arab style, heads bowed, and the veils tugged seriously around their faces so you can see only *one* eye as they glide in stately motion single-file across the carpet and gently wend their way up a spiral stairs to the first floor, looking neither to the left nor the right, and not a word out of them.

Two days later at about the same time they arrive again in a rustle of stillness, up the stairs and disappear through a doorway on the balcony. This time I notice that, beneath the voluminous veil affair, one of them is carrying a hold-all bag with 'Adidas' inscribed on the side. Odd.

Closer inspection of the others in the procession suggests that maybe they too are carrying bags beneath the billowing garb.

I amble over and ask the desk-clerk what gives with these ladies. 'They are here for the sauna', he explains. 'They come about three times a week'.

I hadn't realised that the El Khebir had a sauna.

'They're a volley-ball team', he adds.

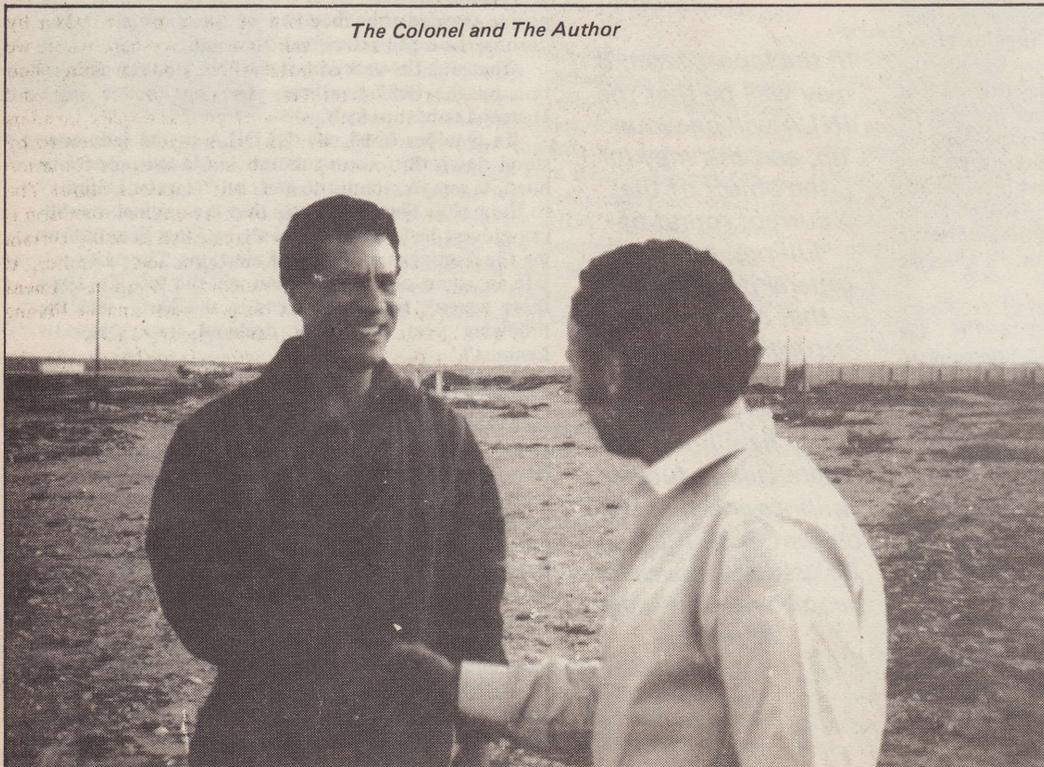
Maybe they are into volley-ball because the Colonel is, too. Just beside the Colonel's tent in the

desert near Sirte there's a volley-ball court, a concrete slab which was possible ferried out here in a lorry and just dropped with a clump onto the sand. While we're waiting for the Colonel to arrive a bunch of the revolutionary guards suggest we might have a game, so we form two teams with me and the Brit-liberal director lining out with thee of the guards against another international selection. They take it very earnestly, do the Libyans, disputing points and orchestrating the teams so that everyone switches position after each service, just as it's apparently laid down in the rules and to the extent that you get your mind into the game you tend to forget that a couple of the guards have deposited their Kalashnikovs on top of their camouflage jackets on the sand by the side of the court and that, objectively considered, this is something of a weird scene, leaping about playing volleyball with the Colonel's bodyguard on the fringe of the Sahara, occasionally swinging your sights round the horizon for signs of a dust-cloud or something indicating that the man himself is about to arrive.

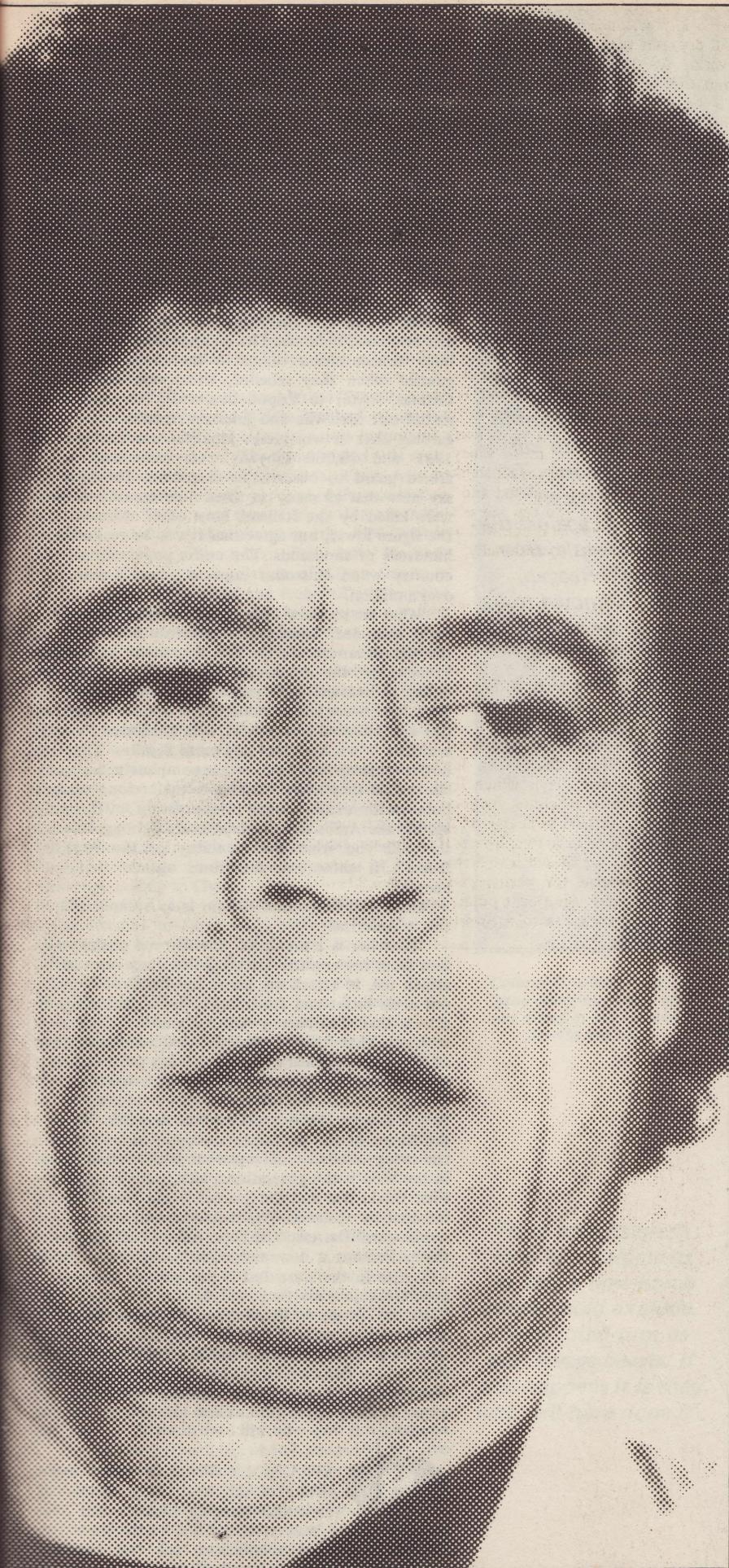
The Colonel arrives in a range-rover, from which he alights about six hundred yards away for no seeming reason other than he must fancy the stroll, and approaches at deliberate speed, flanked by a fellow in full military uniform, bush-hat and all, and a slightly dishevelled guy who you can see as they come nearer is wringing his hands as if agitated and talking all the while. The Colonel occasionally nods gravely in acknowledgement.

WE'D travelled from Tripoli to Sirte in a government jet – the aircraft which was forced down in Tel Aviv by Israeli fighters last year when *en route* from Damascus to Tripoli in an action which, had the Libyans done it to an Israeli plane, would have produced headlines and outraged editorials the world over about the intolerable terrorism of the mad-man Ghaddafi. It's an opulently appointed craft with leather-upholstered seats, a refrigerator from which iced Pepsi Cola is served and a video machine. As soon as we've taken off the Libyan official in charge of the party chooses one from a rack of cassettes, inserts it in the machine and advises that we should watch this, it's very good. We prepare ourselves for, perhaps, edited highlights of the Colonel's more significant public pronouncements but in fact it's the Warner Brothers' disaster-farce

The Colonel and The Author



GHADDAFFI



movie, 'Airplane'. We come in to land at the point where a stewardess is inflating the automatic pilot by blowing into a tube positioned in his groin. The official says that we can see the second half on the way back.

A British television crew, I'm told, once made a movie which won awards, called 'Waiting For The Colonel'. It was filmed entirely in the lobby of the El Khebir and starred the crew fidgeting with frustration for days on end as they waited for the call which never came. Nobody tells you in advance when exactly The Interview will happen, or confirm for definite that it will happen at all. Producing telexes from the Foreign Press Bureau saying that The Interview is on elicits dubious looks and speculation as to who might have authorised this message and, indeed, who might have authorised whoever it was had authorised it. What everybody wants, pronto, is The Questions, worded exactly, which we are told will be translated into Arabic and conveyed to the Colonel approval. Any question the Colonel doesn't want to answer mustn't be put. Mention of the death of Woman Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan Embassy in London in 1984 would, it seems, be *most* unwise. Assuming, that is, that we ever make it into the Colonel's presence to ask him anything.

Piastre Pete, who was along because he's an accredited expert on the Middle East and especially on Libya and writes with authority on the region in a quality British daily, was of the opinion that we'd possibly never get to the Colonel and that the main reason for this would be the characteristic inefficiency of all Libyans. Piastre explained this as we walked towards a Syrian restaurant a couple of hundred yards from the hotel. The Syrian restaurant was, snorted Piastre, the *only* restaurant open in Tripoli, an indication of the ramshackle nature of the Libyan society. Piastre revealed this as we passed another premises in which a dozen or so people could be seen through the window sitting down to meals served by waiters. One began to wonder about Piastre Pete. The camera crew arrived at eight o'clock on a Monday night. An hour later the Press Bureau phoned to check that we were all present and ready to go, which we were, and to tell us then to be ready for the Colonel next morning.

At eight o'clock in the morning another official arrived urgently wanting another copy of The Questions.

After we touch down at Sirte we are taken by limousine and transit van to a military base where we stop off at a class of hotel where students doing their annual stint of military training go for rest and recreation, in which games of pool and space invaders seem to figure heavily. Ali, whom we'd spoken to by phone before coming to Libya and who set the interview up, is more than a little anxious about The Questions. Somebody else of indeterminate function is anxious to know whether Fianna Fail is really certain to hack up in the Irish election and whether, if elected, the party might welcome Libyan investment in Ireland. He's told that on past performance Fianna Fail will take money from anybody anywhere.

Ali is the fellow who's wringing his hands when he eventually reappears at the Colonel's side out in the desert. Immediately the Colonel moves into view the officials around the tent who've been helping the camera crew set up become suddenly animated. A scrap of orange peel which we've carelessly dropped on the sand is pounced on and scurried away. The bags and cases in which we've carried the TV gear are stacked even more neatly by the side of the tent. There's six or seven of these officials, vaguely in charge of the operation, and they visibly tense as the Colonel comes nearer. He's wearing a *very* natty jumpsuit sort of garment with a designer label and those dark glasses which assist the designers of western magazine covers in making him look sinister.

It turns out later that the reason – or one of the reasons anyway – the bevy of officials are more than somewhat agitated is that everyone had gotten it into

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their heads that the interview is for an Irish magazine and Irish television. Only when we'd arrived at Sirte had it become clear to them that the television programme (Channel Four's 'Diverse Reports') is British and, moreover, that the footage will be used in America too, by an independent network which has been brought in on the act to help defray some of the expenses. Somebody's going to have to explain this to the Colonel. These guys are like any group of civil servants anywhere upon whom it suddenly dawns, too late, that they've quite possibly screwed up on one of the boss's gigs. In contrast to the fluster of officials the revolutionary guards are not at all psyched out of their nonchalance by the approach of their Leader. When he's about twenty yards or so away and I mutter that maybe I'd better step out and introduce myself, one of the guards grins and gives me a wink, so I give her a wink back.

It's difficult to tell what the Colonel's reaction is. It's explained to him in the tent what the set-up is. The Colonel answers, naturally, in Arabic, and since his features are dominated by the shades it's not easy to detect from his expression whether he's just making sure he understands what's going on or that he's about to get up and stride off into the desert. The words 'America', 'Britain' and 'Ireland' come through as he wags an admonishing finger, then shrugs and gestures, all right, let's get on with it.

It turns out he hasn't seen a list of The Questions and doesn't particularly want to. He settles himself into position and says, in effect, 'Ask me anything'. We ask him would he ever take off the glasses, that he looks a lot better without them. He tilts his head back and tautens his jaw into the classic Ghaddaffi-as-ogre pose, chuckles and takes the glasses off.

THERE'S a scene in the Michael J. Fox movie, 'Back To The Future' in which the hero is making his way through a deserted city at night towards a rendezvous with his nutty-professor pal, when suddenly a jeep roars into view with a group of swarthy-faced, evil-looking and heavily-armed fellows hanging out of the windows. The hero utters a single-word exclamation: 'Libyans!'

The image of Libya as a terrorist state and of Ghaddaffi as a three-quarters crazy dictator is so deeply embedded in the western consciousness that it's virtually impossible to engender rational discussion of the man or the country he leads. And since rationality has been abandoned, facts don't matter either. The *Irish Times* recently informed its readers in an editorial that there are 80,000 Libyan troops in Chad. There are fewer than 80,000 troops in the entire Libyan army. The government installed in Chad by France and the United States reckons that there are two thousand Libyan troops inside what it claims are its borders. The British consul in Tripoli estimates the number at 'maybe four hundred'.

What I wanted to find out from Ghaddaffi was the way he sees the world and how he reacts to the way the world sees him.

I asked him how important Libya's colonial history was in shaping present attitudes.

'It is very important of course. Our country has never been left free from foreign interference. There have always been unfair attacks on us, going right back to the Crusaders, the Order of St. John, the Turks. We were invaded by the Italians even before Mussolini. It has been a tragic experience, but heroic too. Our people were ground down by the Italians. Many were killed. They set up places for mass hangings, put our people into concentration camps. Thousands were kidnapped and taken off to Italy. We have never discovered what happened to these people. To this day we are asking the Italians to tell us what happened, even to tell us where their graves are. But we still do not know. These were innocent people. What happened to them?'

He talks very slowly, his face an expressionless mask except that his eyes sometimes narrow and he fixes me with a steady stare, as if wanting to confirm



'We are not involved in terrorism. It is not in our nature to kill innocent people. This is American propaganda against the Libyan people, from Ronald Reagan. Reagan is known to be a reader of bad scenarios. The world should know that we are innocent.'

that I really want an answer to this question, that it's as seriously asked as the subject it raises.

The history of colonialism everywhere is terrible. What happened to Libya was almost unimaginably horrible. Nobody knows how many Libyans were slaughtered in the struggle against Mussolini between 1922 and 1932 because, well, nobody was counting. An English writer (John Wright in 'Libya: Italy's Promised Land') estimates that in one of the three provinces into which Libya was divided, Cyrenaica, where Ghaddaffi comes from, 12,000 Libyans were hanged annually. Gibbets on which as many as thirty could be hanged at a time were erected in village centres and town squares. Guerrillas under Libya's national hero, Omar Mukhtar, fought a war of resistance, riding into battle on horseback and on camels, armed with carbines. The Italians used aircraft and armoured columns. The Bedouin were herded into huge concentration camps in the desert, machine-gunned when they rebelled, which was often. One German visitor to Tripoli observed: 'No army ever meted out such vile and inhuman treatment . . . regarding lives as worthless'. Mukhtar was captured in 1931 and 20,000 Libyans were assembled under armed guard to observe his execution. The Libyans say now that as many as three quarters of a million were killed by the Italians. Most other estimates put the figure lower, but agree that it's to be reckoned in hundreds of thousands. The entire population of the country when Mussolini came to power was a little over a million.

'What we see now', says Ghaddaffi, 'is that we are being encircled. There is the American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. To the East they are in Egypt. The French and the Americans are in Chad. They are trying to reassert their military domination over us. They have never left us alone. There is a new Crusader-like spirit abroad in the west, it is motivated by anti-semitism - we Arabs are of course Semites. They are out to destroy the Arab nation completely . . . why else would they allow the Israelis to develop a nuclear bomb, without any protest or reservation . . . It is only against the Arabs that the Israelis are fighting. Doesn't this tell you what the mentality of the West is? Doesn't it show evil intentions against the Arab people?'

Does he believe that Britain is as complicit in all this as America?

'Thatcher is a murderer. She allowed planes to be sent from her country knowing that they intended to attack me, to attack my home and family. Naturally, one feels bitter and frustrated. We thought after the attack that Thatcher would be put on trial, as a criminal. That Reagan would be charged. But nothing of the sort happened . . . Thatcher is a prostitute. She sold herself to Reagan and now she has sold her country too. She doesn't represent the interests of the British people. It is not just me who says this. It is also the leader of the parliamentary opposition in Britain and many others . . . The present generation in power in the West is the generation which brought about the First World War and the Second World War. They are infected by violence. Was it Africans who caused the world wars? Or Asians or Latin Americans? No. It was them. Perhaps a new and more peaceful generation will arise in the West. But if the spirit of the present generation prevails they will destroy the world . . . What can we say to the children who were victims of the American attack? Perhaps they will in time want to take revenge on Reagan and Thatcher. For personal reasons, for family reasons. These attacks on us, they are charging us up, like a time-bomb which could explode. They could turn us into savage beasts. If that happens, it is *they* who will have done it'.

REPEATEDLY Ghaddaffi returns to the theme of the West being infected by violence, ranging back over the Hundred Years' War, even the War of the Roses, the violent history of colonialism, the fact that the American State was founded on the near-exterior-

mination of an indigenous people, the Red Indians, the fact that Libyans, and Arabs generally, have frequently been among the victims of this violence, and still are. To Ghaddafi, as to Libyans one talked to in the hotel or the street or at the People's Congresses, the notion that *they* are characterised by violence seems bewildering.

In the West the Desert Campaign in World War Two is remembered as a harsh and militarily fascinating contest between Montgomery's Eighth Army and the Axis forces led by Rommel. To Libyans it was two European armies devastating their country as they settled their differences. Benghazi suffered a thousand air raids. Tobruk is celebrated in British history as the scene of a glorious victory over the Germans. Tobruk is a Libyan town which was reduced to ruins.

'They have never left us alone', Ghaddafi repeats. 'They will not leave us alone to build up our country, to develop our economy. They have always had imperialist designs on us'.

In the years after the Second World War Libya was the poorest country in the Middle East and among the poorest in the world. Average *per capita* income was thirty-five dollars a year. The main export was scrap metal gathered from the battlefields. There was no educational system. Ninety per cent of the population was illiterate. There were three Libyan doctors. After a visit to examine the situation, the UN Deputy General Secretary, Dr Adrian Pelt, from Holland, reported: 'The Arab population of Libya stands in need of as much financial and technical assistance as the United Nations can supply'. A UN report prepared by American economist John Lindberg said: 'The standard of housing is extremely low; a large percentage of the population lives in caves, lacking furniture and the simplest conveniences. Clothing is made out of home-grown wool. The poor are clad in rags and walk barefoot, even in the fairly cold winters'. Infant mortality was over thirty per cent.

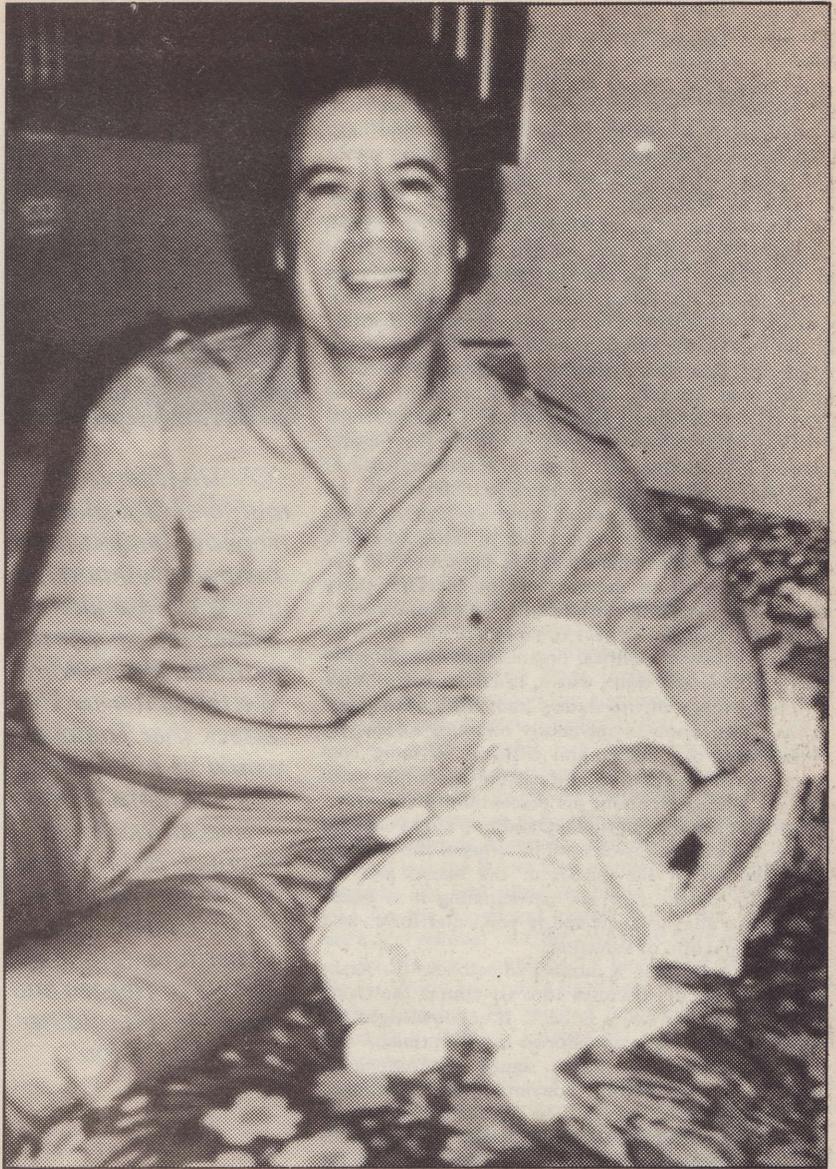
America was in control of the western province of Tripolitania and had established its first-ever base in Africa at the Wheelus Field outside Tripoli; it was the second-biggest US base in the world. The British held sway in the Eastern province of Cyrenaica. The French has advanced into the Southern province of Fezzan from their colony in Chad.

The Soviet Union joined the three Western powers in an attempt to agree on a carve-up. The French argued that they should be allowed to hold on to Fezzan on the ground that, actually, it was part of Chad. The British Labour Government of Attlee struck a deal which would have given Fezzan to the French, Cyrenaica to themselves and Tripolitania back to the Italians. The US and the USSR vetoed this idea, mainly on the ground that they'd been left out. The United Nations declared Libya independent in 1951. The British installed a hopelessly corrupt leader of a minority religious sect as 'King' Idris. Ghaddafi was eleven years old. I asked him as we went for a dander in the desert after the interview whether he remembered any of this. He gave a long, slow, bleak smile: 'Yes. Oh, yes'.

I'd asked him whether the political poverty of this heritage didn't make for difficulties in the operation of the very ambitious system of government he'd established. He allowed, somewhat patronisingly, that this was a very intelligent and objective remark. 'It is true that our people had no experience of democracy before the revolution. We had become used to being ruled by invaders, one after the other, and had never exercised authority of any kind. This can make difficulties. Our people were demoralised and had lost self-confidence. The habits of the past do not easily go away.'

He was less forthcoming when I pressed him to give me examples of the difficulties he had in mind. 'Nevertheless, the revolutionary plan is proceeding successfully. The people are exercising authority...'

Put simply, the political system works like this. Everybody in Libya is a member of a Basic People's Congress, of which there are about 2,000. The BPCs



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Colonel Ghaddafi with his baby daughter, Hana, who was killed in the American air-raid last year.

'These attacks on us, they are charging us up, like a time-bomb which could explode. They could turn us into savage beasts. If that happens it is they who will have done it.'

meet annually, every day for about a fortnight, and discuss everything from local amenities to international relations. Each BPC elects two delegates who convey the decisions to the General People's Congress, which also meets annually and elects a council of ministers. Each BPC also elects a People's Committee. The decisions of the BPC are returned to the People's Committees for implementation at local level. This is the *jamahiria*, the 'state of the masses'. It goes without saying that the thinking of Ghaddafi is enormously influential and rarely challenged. The militants of the 'Revolutionary Committees', zealous adherents of Ghaddafi's theories, have the task of 'energising' the people and 'inciting' them to take the 'correct' decisions. But it's worth mentioning that proposals from Ghaddafi have on occasion been defeated. A plan he had devised to abolish primary schooling up to the age of ten was thrown out, largely, one gathers, because Libyan mothers who were to be given responsibility for the early education of their offspring decided that this wasn't really a bright idea. His proposal that women be given equal rights in the armed forces was likewise rejected. Ghaddafi subsequently won a majority to reverse the latter decision.

We attended two Basic People's Congresses, one in Tripoli city centre, one in the outskirts. Among the subjects under discussion were the proposed introduction of a computerised system for health records, the American attack, and the purchase by Libyan Arab Airlines of two BAC airbuses. The airbuses had been bought via Spain in defiance of the economic

'sanctions' against Libya and on that account had cost well above the market price. An operating and maintenance contract on them was also costing an exorbitant sum. There was heated discussion about the wisdom of this transaction, one woman speaking from a balcony arguing that the money could have been far more sensibly spent and asking who exactly was going to travel in these planes anyway, implying it probably wouldn't be the likes of her. She was loudly cheered. The meetings we attended weren't 'packed'. The people gave no sign of being cowed by the platforms. The big wheel at one of the Congresses was Abdul Latif Bokar, head of the Foreign Press Bureau. We'd asked him to organise a spot of chanting at the end of the meeting, reckoning that this would make for dramatic television pictures. We'd been assured that chanting would be no problem. At the close of the meeting a Revolutionary Committeeman took the microphone and made with the cheer-leader chants. A scattering of well-placed followers rose to their feet and joined in, clenched fists raised. All around the hall young people broke up laughing, most of the women bustled out and old men looked at one another and rolled their eyes in agreement at the silliness of it all. A member of the platform party apologised sheepishly afterwards. 'Sometimes they don't want to chant. What can you do?'

This system of political organisation is outlined in Ghaddaffi's Green Book which, in effect, sets out the official ideology of the state. Ghaddaffi sees the ideas in the Green Book as universally relevant. At least by implication, this makes him a threat to more conservative Arab regimes. It also has the effect that when you ask Ghaddaffi about his perception of the Arabs' position in the world generally and how it has changed in recent years he answers not in terms of the interests of States but of the moods of the masses and the extent to which they are participating in a broad struggle for advancement and in particular for an end to the occupation of Palestine.

'There have been a number of setbacks for Arabs but a number of successes too. Of course the Camp David Agreement was a setback. It acknowledged the borders of Israel and abandoned the Palestinians. But I don't believe that Egypt signed the Agreement because she had become convinced that the Zionist occupation was acceptable. The Agreement was signed because Egypt had been defeated in the 1973 war. The Egyptian people haven't become reconciled to the Israeli State and can be mobilised again for struggle. Again, the events in Lebanon were a setback, the Israeli invasion, the expulsion of Palestinian fighters. But at the same time the invasion sparked a response. You can see what the Arab youth did to the Americans and French marines. This is the feeling that the imperialists are engendering in the Arabs and it could in the end erupt and destroy all American and Zionist interests in the region. The attack on us is the same thing. It has the same effect. Despite many divisions this is the feeling that is growing in the Arab world'.

ON the face of it the Libyan people themselves would seem to share this feeling. It's impossible to be certain on the basis of so brief an acquaintance but the anti-American fervour at the Congresses seemed genuine and Libyans one talked to at random in the streets echoed Ghaddaffi's attitudes accurately enough. They are intensely aware of the way they are seen in the West, and deeply resentful of it. 'We know what you think', they will begin a conversation. 'You think this is a terrorist State. You think Colonel Ghaddaffi is a madman. It's not true'.

Almost certainly, their conviction is based at least as much on the economic advances made since 1969 as on the elemental nationalism which Ghaddaffi personifies. When Ghaddaffi talks about the revolutionary plan proceeding he refers not just to fundamental ideas but to the concrete reality of Libyan life.



'Thatcher is a murderer. She allowed planes to be sent from her country knowing that they intended to attack me, to attack my home and family... We thought after the attack that Thatcher would be put on trial, as a criminal. That Reagan would be charged. But nothing of the sort happened... Thatcher is a prostitute. She sold herself to Reagan and now she has sold her country too'.

Average income is now ten thousand dollars a year. There are no signs of either abject poverty or conspicuous wealth. The health service and the educational system are free and available to all. It's laid down in law that a Libyan needing medical treatment which cannot be provided at home, or wanting to do a university course not available at home, must be sent abroad at the State's expense. This accounts for the vast numbers of Libyan students scattered around the world and also for the remarkably detailed knowledge many Libyans have about the medical specialities of foreign countries. Bulgaria is good for heart problems, Italy has the edge in blood disorders... It's law, too, that the State must provide every citizen with a home. In terms of health, medical and housing provision for its people, Libya is the most advanced country in Africa. Since 1969 it had made greater progress in these areas than any other country in the world.

As Ghaddaffi sees it, the Americans, in attempting to overthrow the 1969 revolution, are seeking to deprive Libya of these gains. He says: 'They want to turn the clock back'.

Ghaddaffi's attitude to the American presence is stunningly simple. After he had talked at some length, and somewhat repetitively, about the malign intentions of America towards Arabs, I asked him whether he conceded that America had any legitimate interests in the region: 'None whatever'.

It is that view which has made conflict with the United States inevitable.

I put it to him that relations with the West were not always so hostile, that the British and American bases had been evacuated without overdue fuss when the army officers' regime which overthrew Idris demanded that they go. 'At the time, they were not in a strong position. They hadn't given up on imperialist designs towards us, but they were unable to resist our demands. But since then they have been intent on regaining their position. They have not accepted our independence'.

He explains the Libyan attitude to the clashes in the Gulf of Sirte in patient detail. The Gulf is that deep wriggle on Libya's Mediterranean coastline which can be seen in a glance at a map. The American Sixth Fleet began manoeuvres in the Gulf in early 1981, within months of the accession of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Libyan planes challenged fighters from the US carriers. Two Libyan planes were shot down. The Americans claimed that they were making a legal point, asserting the right of free passage for shipping in the Gulf.

Ghaddaffi turns his head away and grimaces with exasperation when this is put to him. 'As a pretext it's quite ridiculous. Nobody in the world could accept it. Historically, the Gulf has been Libyan. Whoever dominated Libya also claimed domination over the Gulf. This was the situation with the Turks, then the Italians. When the Americans were here they too claimed domination over the Gulf... The Gulf is not an international waterway, like Panama, Suez or Hormuz. It divides two parts of Libya. It leads to nowhere but Libya. We have no objection to commercial traffic, ships using the Gulf for trade or tourism. This is quite acceptable. What we object to is military manoeuvres'.

The Americans attacked again in the Gulf in March last year. Radar stations along the coast were hit by bombers and missiles used to sink Libyan patrol boats. At least twenty Libyans died, possibly many more. This time the Reagan administration offered an additional justification: that it was 'punishing' Libya and Ghaddaffi for alleged terrorism.

Ghaddaffi dismisses this, too, as a pretext. 'We are not involved in terrorism. It is not in our nature to kill innocent people. This is American propaganda against the Libyan people, from Ronald Reagan. Reagan is known to be a reader of bad scenarios'.

He says elsewhere: 'It is worrying when acting interferes with serious matters, when Hollywood acting becomes acting on the international stage, when

international matters, international politics are treated in the same way as in Hollywood films, with the same mentality, by the same person'.

He demands to know where the evidence is of Libyan sponsorship of terrorism. He draws a distinction between general support for movements around the world fighting against what he perceives as imperialist oppression, whose violence is rooted in local circumstances, and terrorism in the sense in which it has been persistently alleged against Libya: that is, violence by Libya.

THREE dramatic acts of terrorism in 1985 were attributed to Libya by much of the Western media – the hijacking of a TWA aircraft, the hijacking of the cruise liner, the Achille Lauro and the massacres at Rome and Vienna airports. In justifying the March '86 attacks in the Gulf, Reagan explicitly claimed that Ghaddaffi had been responsible. When pressed on these matters Ghaddaffi shows open irritation, turning his head away to gaze into the middle distance. 'We are not a terrorist country. We do not kill innocent people. There is no evidence and the world should know that we are innocent'. His expression conveys: 'What more can I say?'

The bombing of 15 April last was presented by America as a direct response to a specific act of Libyan terrorism – the attack on the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin. In a broadcast a few hours after the bombing, Reagan claimed that the evidence against Libya was 'conclusive'. Press stories referred as fact to messages intercepted between the Libyan embassy in East Berlin and Tripoli before and after the bombing. Ghaddaffi says that the messages don't exist. The transcripts have never been produced. The West Berlin police deny any knowledge of the messages or of any other evidence pointing to Libyan responsibility. What evidence they have uncovered appears to point towards Syria.

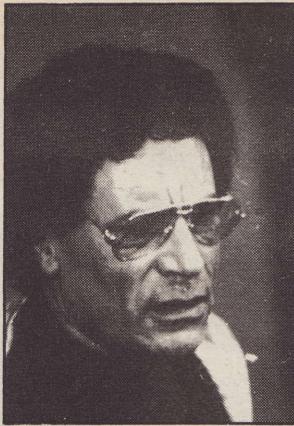
Ghaddaffi is visibly irritated when the point is pressed but I plough on anyway and bring up the killing of Yvonne Fletcher in St. James' Square. He makes three points: that, considering the lack of response to the wholesale slaughter of Arabs (10,000 killed in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon), the enormous effect of the death of Yvonne Fletcher on Western attitudes is out of proportion; that the Libyans didn't do it; and that it ought not to have been done.

'She could never have been a target for us. She was a security officer, there for our security. She did not deserve to be killed'.

The demonstration outside the embassy had been organised by the National Front For the Salvation of Libya (NFSL). The Libyans see themselves as being at war with NFSL, and the attitude is reciprocated in full. In July last year the NFSL attempted a coup in Libya, involving a direct military assault on Ghaddaffi's headquarters at the Aziaya Barracks in Tripoli and an invasion by 'commandos' from Tunisia. Estimates of the numbers who died in these attacks – almost unreported in the West – range from twenty to more than a hundred. The NFSL operates from an address in Washington DC. Ghaddaffi's Revolutionary Committees have pursued groups like the NFSL abroad. As Ghaddaffi sees it, what was happening outside the St. James' Square embassy was not a 'picket', as the term is usually understood, but a 'provocation' and quite possibly a prelude to armed attack. The Libyan ambassador to Rome had been assassinated four months earlier and a consulate in Germany bombed.

It seems certain that, despite the denials, the bullet which killed WPC Fletcher came from inside the Libyan embassy. It is certain, too, that, as Ghaddaffi told me, she was not the intended target.

Amnesty International reckons the number of victims of Libyan terrorism at nineteen, fifteen of these being Libyans abroad 'sentenced to death' by the Revolutionary Committees. Yvonne Fletcher is



'I am a revolutionary in struggle. One doesn't become tired when one is engaged in struggle. The struggle will continue. I will continue'.

among the four others. In the period in which these killings took place (1980 up to the present) US proxies in El Salvador and Guatemala killed an estimated 120,000 people.

In the same period the number of Libyans killed by direct American attacks has been over a hundred. These killings began after the election of Reagan.

Reagan came into office reflecting an American desire to reassert itself in the world in the wake of the Iranian hostages humiliation. This attitude was in obvious and total conflict with Ghaddaffi's estimate of America's legitimate interests in the Middle East as 'none whatsoever'. Moreover, the reassertion of US power in the Middle East took the form of an intensification of support for Israel, to the extent that in Libyan eyes the US is a mere agent of the Israeli State: not at all the other way round. And Ghaddaffi sees the existence of the Israeli State as a straightforward colonialist occupation of part of the territory of the Arab nation.

'They have involved Israelis in their very government. I'm thinking here of Kissinger and Schultz. This is a great mistake. The American people should elect themselves a president who is qualified, and who will not involve Israelis'.

The perception of America as the provider of the military might which ensures the existence of Israel and therefore the continuing suffering of the Palestinians expelled from their own country, has propelled Libya into closer alignment with the Soviet Union. I suggested to Ghaddaffi that this relationship was not entirely of his own choosing but had literally been forced on him by American activity.

'We find that the Soviet Union and ourselves face a common enemy, so naturally we are in alignment. The Soviet Union is America's main rival in the world. In the end it is the Soviet Union which America wishes to encircle. We find ourselves being used as a launching pad for the Americans against the Soviet Union, we are target number one. So, really, we have no choice'.

So it's not a question of ideological affinity, the Soviet Union and Libya have been compelled to come closer together. He grinned mischievously and came close to a guffaw: 'America has served Libyan-Soviet relations very well...'

After we'd finished I mentioned that I'd heard he goes for pensive strolls in the desert and would he mind if one came along. He shrugged: 'Why not?'

As we walked he talked about the Great Man-Made River, a huge irrigation scheme which will draw water up from deep beneath the Sahara and pipe it hundreds of miles towards the Mediterranean coast to green the desert. He waved around the expanse of arid scrubland and said, yes, this will be fertile. I muttered that this will be quite an achievement. He grinned broadly and nodded. He was born in a tent around here.

I MENTIONED before we shook hands and parted that I'd been told in advance that he'd be a forbidding character and desperately difficult to interview, but that he wasn't really intimidating at all. I'm not entirely certain he took this as a complement.

He wandered off down into a little valley which was carpeted by desert flowers, chatting animatedly to the revolutionary guards who bounced along around him, giggling a lot.

The last thing I'd asked him about was the effect on himself of the American raid, which came close to killing him, wounded his wife and two sons and killing his fifteen-month-old daughter, Hana. Did he never get fed up with the whole business, having so many people looking to him for leadership and as a source of energy and glared at by much of the rest of the world? Did he ever think that he'd have been better off becoming a doctor or a writer or something?

'Ah, this might be true if I was just a president or a politician in office. One might become tired of that. But I am a revolutionary in struggle. One doesn't become tired when one is engaged in struggle. The struggle will continue. I will continue'.