



"They captured him alive and while he was being taken away, they beat him and then they killed him," one senior source in the NTC said. "He might have been resisting."

In what appeared to contradict the events depicted in the video, Libya's ruling National Transitional Council said Gadhafi was killed when a gunfight broke out after his capture between his supporters and government fighters. He died from a bullet wound to the head.

It said no order had been given to kill him.

Gadhafi called the rebels who rose up against his 42-years of one-man rule "rats", but in the end it was he who was captured cowering in a drainage pipe full of rubbish and filth.

"He called us rats, but look where we found him," said Ahmed Al Sahati, a 27-year-old government fighter, standing next to two stinking drainage pipes under a six-lane highway near Sirte.

On the ground, government fighters and the scenes of sheer carnage nearby told the story of Gadhafi's final hours.

Shortly before dawn prayers on Thursday, Gadhafi, surrounded by a few dozen loyal bodyguards and accompanied by the head of his now non-existent army Abu Bakr Younis Jabr, broke out of the two-month siege of Sirte and made a break for the west.

But they did not get far.

France said its aircraft struck military vehicles belonging to Gadhafi forces near Sirte at about 8:30 am (0630 GMT) on Thursday, but said it was unsure whether the strikes had killed Gadhafi.

Some two miles west of Sirte, 15 pick-up trucks mounted with heavy machine guns lay burnt out, smashed and smouldering next to an electricity sub station some 20 metres from the main road.

They had clearly been hit by a force far beyond anything the motley army the former rebels has assembled during eight months of revolt to overthrow the once feared leader.

But there was no bomb crater, indicating the strike may have been carried out by a helicopter gunship, or that it had been strafed by a fighter jet.