

Italy prepares to send troops to Lebanon

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16 August 2006

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and his foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, announced at the weekend that Italy was prepared to send several thousand soldiers as well as ships, helicopters and armoured vehicles to participate in the planned international force in south Lebanon. Participation in this UN mission with its "robust" mandate would constitute the biggest foreign intervention by Italian troops since the Second World War.

Prodi had already promised Italian troops for Lebanon during the G8 summit held in St. Petersburg in mid-July. At the European Union crisis meeting in Brussels at the beginning of August, Italy was among the countries eager to take part in a so-called "peace mission" (alongside Spain, Finland, Poland and Sweden) and promised to provide 3,500 soldiers.

On Sunday, Defence Secretary Arturo Parisi said he expected "the Lebanon mission would find broad agreement, particularly within the [centre-left] majority." It would come about "in a short period of time...days rather than weeks," he said. Parisi explained that the new UN resolution had changed the character of such a mission from "purely observing 'guidelines' to 'arbitrating' at the centre of events, able to identify violations and implement the authority of the rules."

In reality, the depiction of the planned UN mission as "impartial" is thoroughly fraudulent. The mission, which has been agreed to by both Israel and the US, is aimed at consolidating the aims of Israeli aggression. The UN resolution calls upon Hezbollah to stop all attacks, while Israel is required to merely halt its "offensive military operations" and can remain in south Lebanon until UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) is fully stationed in the region, withdrawing "in parallel" with the introduction of the multinational force.

It would then play a similar role as the ISAF troops in Afghanistan—i.e., to free up US (and its ally Israel's)

forces for further provocations against Syria and Iran.

This is precisely the mission now being urged not only by Prime Minister Prodi and Defence Secretary Parisi (Margherita party) but also by Foreign Minister and Vice-Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema of the Left Democrats, the successor party to the Italian Communist Party. D'Alema had already met with Condoleezza Rice in Jerusalem at the end of July and invited her to the Middle East conference, which he had organised together with Prodi for July 26 in Rome. This conference adopted a stance of appeasement and in effect gave a green light to the Israeli armed forces, which have been heavily armed by the US, to intensify its military bombardment and destruction in south Lebanon.

The right-wing turn by the Prodi government has taken place at astonishing speed. Its predecessor, the government led by Silvio Berlusconi, had earned the scorn of millions through its military participation in the Iraq war and occupation. Millions of Italians had taken part in protests against Italian military involvement. Now, the Prodi government is following in Berlusconi's footsteps through its planned participation in the UN mission in Lebanon.

An especially despicable role is being played by Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista—RC), the party that split from the Left Democrats 15 years ago allegedly to "refound" communism. Today, the party is an important component in the government majority, and its leader of many years, Fausto Bertinotti, is speaker for the parliament.

Rifondazione played a major role in Prodi's election victory in the spring of this year. One of the demands raised by Prodi in his election campaign, and supported by Communist Refoundation, was the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq. In fact, there still remain 2,700 of the total contingent of 3,200 soldiers sent to Iraq by

the Berlusconi government.

In July, there were disputes in the Italian parliament concerning further financing of the army deployments abroad, which called for new legislation. Italy also has 1,400 soldiers stationed in Afghanistan as part of the ISAF mission.

In the lower house (chamber of deputies), where Prodi has a safe majority, four delegates from the government majority, who are all members of Communist Refoundation, opposed the deployment of troops in Afghanistan, including Francesco Caruso, the leader of the “No Global” movement. Another Rifondazione member, Paolo Cacciari, resigned his seat in protest.

Shortly before the vote in the Senate, where Prodi has a wafer-thin majority, the entire leadership of Communist Refoundation, including Fausto Bertinotti and his successor as party chief, Franco Giordano, went on the offensive. Together with state president Giorgio Napolitano (also a former member of the Italian Communist Party), they argued that the future of the Prodi government was at stake and that Italy was obliged to participate in UN-sanctioned international missions.

Finally, on July 28, Prodi was able to win a confidence vote in the Senate over the financing of foreign missions. Critics from the ranks of Communist Refoundation, who had previously voted on eight separate occasions against the Afghanistan deployment, backed the government this time and supported Prodi. For their part, the right-wing opposition led by Berlusconi did not want to oppose Prodi on the issue of sending troops abroad and refrained from voting.



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