

# Sarkozy angers European Union over Libya's release of Bulgarian medics

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Six medical workers—five Bulgarian and one Palestinian—sentenced to death on fabricated charges and held for eight years, have finally been released by the Libyan government.

The outcome is a coup for the French government. Through the late intervention of Cecilia Sarkozy, wife of the French president, and the government of Qatar, France has succeeded in stamping its interests onto a nearly completed deal to deepen European Union relations with Libya.

The medical workers were falsely accused in 1999 of infecting hundreds of children in Benghazi with the HIV virus. They were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and sentenced to death twice. Exposed to extended psychological stresses, they have been through a devastating experience the consequences of which they will be dealing with long after the media and the diplomats have forgotten them.

Their misfortune was for their lives to fall between the gears of manoeuvres between the Libyan government and the major powers over the terms of Libya's reintegration into world imperialism.

Under the terms of deal, not all of which are clear, some €9.5 million from the European Commission will be channelled to the Benghazi children's hospital. Each of the families of the several hundred children infected with HIV will get \$1 million compensation, while the children themselves will reportedly get lifetime access to medical care.

A fund set up to dispense the compensation will include \$44 million from Bulgaria in the form of a debt write-off. Other countries with debts from Libya have also agreed to them being written off. The sources of all the funding are deliberately obscure to avoid the EU giving the impression that it simply paid the cash asked by Libya. In total some \$460 million has been made available.

The government of Qatar, a recipient of French arms sales, and praised by all parties after the deal, may have been the source or conduit for much of the cash.

Austrian diplomat Benita Ferrero-Waldner said the deal will "open the way for a new and enhanced relationship

between the EU and Libya and reinforce our ties with the Mediterranean region and the whole of Africa."

Libyan trade with the EU is already very lucrative, and dwarfs the small amounts haggled over for the medics' release. Oil accounts for 95 percent of Libyan exports and goes mostly to the EU—40 percent to Italy. Libyan oil is near the surface, light, and geographically closer to the EU than that from any other major oilfield.

Since the end of sanctions against Libya—backed by the United States, the EU and United Nations—the country has become the destination of choice for oil companies seeking access to reserves of around 100 billion barrels, along with large unexplored areas of desert offering potentially comparable resources. Seven billion dollars worth of new investment in oil and gas exploration is anticipated before 2015. In May 2007, for example, British oil company BP agreed a \$2 billion deal covering an area the size of West Virginia.

Trade with France is already considerable. Imports from Libya to France were worth €756 million in 2003, mostly oil, and rose to €1.9 billion in 2006. French construction giant Vinci is involved with building Libyan leader Muammar's Gaddafi's "Great Man-made River" irrigation canal project.

Yet, as of 2005, France only accounted for 6 percent of Libyan imports, compared with Italy's 21 percent and Germany's 11 percent. In 2006, total EU exports to Libya were €25 billion, of which France supplied only €3.66 billion. The biggest oil contracts have gone to the UK and US.

France also has a history of supplying military equipment to Libya in the 1970s, some of which is still in use, making maintenance contracts potentially valuable. Relations collapsed following the 1976 seizure of part the former French colony, Chad—the contested mineral-rich Aozou Strip—and did not begin to recover until Libyan compensation for a 1989 attack on a French airliner, UTA 772, destroyed over Chad.

Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac visited Libya in

2004. Two months later, the defence minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, signed a letter of intent on military cooperation. A military maintenance contract followed. Gaddafi expressed an interest in buying new French fighter planes and helicopters.

In 2006 an initial agreement on cooperation on civil nuclear development was reached. France also has an eye on the infrastructure, satellite and road projects that Libya will require in the immediate future.

Despite these burgeoning relations, for both the EU and France the captive medics, and the international outrage over their treatment, presented a growing obstacle. This was greatly sharpened following Bulgaria's accession to the EU on January 1, 2007.

A face-saving solution became imperative and had all but been agreed prior to Sarkozy's election victory, largely under the auspices of the German EU presidency.

During the French presidential campaign, however, Nicolas Sarkozy had promised that resolving the affair of the medics would be one of his initial priorities. Underlying his urgency were both French corporate demands for a still bigger share of the Libyan market and French aspirations for their diplomatic and military resources to be used more aggressively.

After his election, Sarkozy promised Gaddafi that he would visit Libya. His wife was despatched immediately.

According to an EU official who paraphrased Cecilia Sarkozy's remarks, she told Gaddafi, "My husband will come tomorrow if you do this deal.... You are going to release them [the medics] anyway, so get on with it. This is your chance to come back to the international fold."

Significantly, the first the EU heard of the French intervention was when Cecilia Sarkozy stepped off the plane in Tripoli. Sarkozy also appears to have given his wife the authority to offer more tangible titbits beyond his presidential presence.

Sarkozy himself travelled to the Libyan capital Tripoli following the medics' release. The two governments then announced a memorandum of understanding for the construction of a civil nuclear power station by the French nuclear operator Areva. According to *Der Spiegel*, France will also have access to Libya's 1,600 tons of stored uranium.

Sarkozy's own comments make clear that the deal with Libya cannot be separated from broader French imperialist concerns over the threat to its interests posed by destabilisation throughout the Arab world caused by the US occupation of Iraq.

He warned, "If we dare to say that civilian nuclear energy is reserved for the northern coast of the Mediterranean and that the Arab world is not responsible enough for nuclear

energy, then we are humiliating them and paving the way for a war of civilizations."

Since coming to power, Sarkozy has also developed discussions with Algeria and Tunisia over possible nuclear power contracts for Areva and to promote a "Mediterranean Union." Seen as a zone of free trade as well as a means of immigration control, the diplomatic and military alliance would extend EU and particularly French influence throughout North Africa and as far east as Lebanon.

Libya also figures centrally in the Sarkozy government's efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, where Libya and France have previously come into conflict and where France currently has thousands of troops.

At the same time as Cecilia Sarkozy was setting off for Tripoli, Sarkozy entered the political crisis in Lebanon. In a break from French policy under Chirac, Sarkozy's former Socialist Party foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, invited all parties in Lebanon, including Hezbollah, to a series of meetings at Saint Cloud, west of Paris. Although nothing was achieved, Kouchner intends to hold more talks toward the end of July.

The meeting of all parties was opposed by the Bush administration, representatives of which the French declined to invite. The US has sought to oppose anything that might legitimise opposition to the Fuad Siniora government in Lebanon.

US reaction to the Libyan deal with the medics was distinctly cool. Although officials considered the outcome to be "positive," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice restricted her comments to stating that she hoped to visit Libya sometime soon.

Britain's foreign secretary, David Miliband, blandly talked of extending the "hand of partnership" to Libya. The *Guardian* sniffed that despite Cecilia Sarkozy turning up to "gatecrash" the medics' release, the outcome was an "achievement for the EU's much vaunted 'soft' power" but this involved "suspending moral judgement."



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