

US and Europe step up preparations for intervention in Libya

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The Obama administration yesterday announced a series of unilateral sanctions against Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, including suspension of US military cooperation and cancellation of military component sales. Washington also closed the US embassy in Tripoli and asked international financial institutions to monitor any money transfers made by senior Libyan officials.

The measures were announced ahead of an anticipated imposition of multilateral sanctions through the United Nations in the next few days. "This is a first step, and obviously we continue to review our options going forward," White House press secretary Jay Carney declared.

According to the Reuters news agency, a draft UN Security Council resolution prepared by Britain and France states that the Gaddafi regime's atrocities "may amount to crimes against humanity," warranting referral to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland is also negotiating a resolution on Libya, following the defection of Libyan diplomats on the body. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is due to join a council meeting on Monday.

Behind the various diplomatic manoeuvres, the major imperialist powers are accelerating their contingency plans for military intervention in Libya. The Obama administration continues to stress that "all options are on the table." Speaking from Bahrain on Thursday, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, said, "We are looking at all our capabilities and a range of contingencies, as we always do." He added that he would provide President Obama with "options as comprehensive and robust and as far-ranging as we

can think of."

The European powers have also mobilised their forces. Italian Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa yesterday told the SkyTG24 news channel that his government was planning a "military operation" to rescue Italian nationals stranded in southeast Libya. Britain is preparing likewise. Elite SAS forces are now in Malta, 360 kilometres off the coast of Tripoli, while two naval frigates have been deployed to the Mediterranean. British media reports have referred to a "range of other assets" in the region, including Chinook helicopters and Hercules and C17 aircraft.

An emergency NATO meeting was held in Brussels yesterday afternoon. A subsequent statement said NATO would "continue to consult in order to be prepared for any eventuality." Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen previously stressed that the organisation had "assets that can be used in a situation like this."

The DEBKAF file web site, associated with Israeli military intelligence, claims that "hundreds of US, British and French military advisers, including intelligence officers, were dropped from warships and missile boats at the coastal towns of Benghazi and Tobruk Thursday Feb. 24." No evidence is publicly available to corroborate this report, however.

Any military intervention would be centrally directed toward securing the economically and strategically crucial Libyan oilfields. American, British, Italian, French and German oil conglomerates all have lucrative stakes in Libya's high-quality oil reserves. The operation would be colonialist in character,

marking the further extension of Washington's efforts to use military force to maintain control over energy resources in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The situation in Libya is threatening a major world oil price shock and a sharp downturn in the US economy. On Thursday, Obama underscored this concern when he addressed corporate executives assembled for the "President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness." Speaking of oil prices, he declared, "We actually think that we'll be able to ride out the Libya situation and it will stabilise." Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner sought to allay concerns by stressing the excess oil producing capacity of other OPEC member states.

A US military operation in Libya would have nothing to do with defending the population against Gaddafi's violence or establishing "democracy" in the country. When the regime first unleashed a wave of carnage against opposition forces, Obama's initial response was to say nothing, apparently waiting to see if Gaddafi's forces would quickly regain control. The dictator has enjoyed the warmest of relations with the US and European powers in recent years, having junked barriers previously erected against the operations of foreign oil companies in Libya and declared his full support for the so-called war on terror.

Western governments regarded with alarm the spread into Libya of the North African uprising of workers and youth. Obama was not alone in his stalling as reports of Gaddafi government massacres first emerged. The *Guardian* today reported that the British government's delay in preparing to evacuate its citizens from the country was primarily due to commercial considerations. Unnamed officials told the newspaper that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government of Prime Minister David Cameron had "hesitated because it was concerned about the Libyan response to a hurried decision to evacuate UK citizens from a country with which it was still keen to do lucrative business and in whose future it had invested heavily."

Only now that Gaddafi has lost control of the majority of Libyan territory and proven unable to crush

the opposition have the US and European governments moved against him. They fear the consequences for their economic and strategic interests of a power vacuum or protracted civil war in Libya.

There is ongoing discussion of an initial imposition of a "no-fly" zone. James Phillips, a Middle East expert at the Heritage Foundation, admitted to *USA Today* that this "would amount to military action," adding it "should be used a last resort." The systematic US bombardment of Iraqi targets in the 1990s demonstrated the aggressive character of "no fly" zones. The establishment of one over Libya would almost certainly result in deadly air strikes.

The US and international media have thrown their weight behind the US and European governments' humanitarian posturing, reviving the pretexts that were used as a cover for US-led interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s. On Thursday, the *Financial Times* recalled US President Ronald Reagan's denunciation of Gaddafi in an editorial entitled "Time to Muzzle Libya's Mad Dog." The London-based publication demanded an immediate no-fly zone and the opening up of "humanitarian corridors" from Tunisia and Egypt.

The same theme was sounded by the *New York Times* in its editorial "Stopping Gaddafi." Halting just short of openly demanding military intervention, the newspaper declared: "After Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda, the United States and its allies vowed that they would work harder to stop mass atrocities. One thing is not in doubt: The longer the world temporizes, the more people die."

These statements are utterly cynical and hypocritical. Less than a decade after the *New York Times* played a central role in promoting the bogus "weapons of mass destruction" pretext for the US invasion of Iraq, it is propagandizing in support of another colonial intervention in yet another oil-rich country, Libya.



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