

Calls mount for military intervention in Libya

Ann Talbot
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The British government is actively considering sending Special Forces troops to Libya, on the pretext of rescuing 170 workers trapped in isolated oil exploration encampments, as fighting continues there amid mass uprisings against the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Reports from inside Libya were fragmentary, due to fighting and limitations on foreign media imposed by the Gaddafi regime. They suggested that Misurata, Libya's third-largest city, was in the hands of anti-Gaddafi forces, with fighting moving to cities such as Zawiya and al-Khums, that are closer to Libya's capital, Tripoli. Gaddafi also broadcast another belligerent speech today, blaming the uprising on Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and claiming that protesters were on drugs.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said that he did not rule out the possibility of sending Special Forces to Libya.

Hague convened a meeting of the cabinet emergency group COBRA, along with Defence Secretary Liam Fox. Prime Minister David Cameron is on a trade mission in the Middle East, centring on the sale of arms to Persian Gulf despots.

Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt told LBS radio, "The most significant news is the SAS [Special Air Service] troops that are now ready to spring into action."

When asked directly if he could envisage a British military intervention in Libya, he replied: "Absolutely ... we wouldn't have SAS troops on stand-by if we weren't envisaging the possibility of having to use them."

A statement from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said it was "assisting FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth] officials in Tripoli and has pre-positioned a number of other assets and personnel in the area to assist as and when appropriate as part of the overall Foreign Office led response." It added, "A number of further UK assets are also being readied to assist the FCO if required."

Unnamed sources within the military have let it be known that the Special Boat Service (SBS) has deployed a forward team to a Mediterranean location. British Forces News said that the Special Forces are on alert and will be backed up by paratroopers from the Special Forces Support Group.

Frank Gardner, the BBC's security editor, suggested that SAS personnel might already be on the ground in plain clothes.

The British frigate HMS Cumberland has docked in Benghazi

and a RAF Hercules transport plane has just taken off from Tripoli airport, carrying 70 British passport holders. A second Hercules has been sent to Malta and is ready to make the short trip to Libya.

The situation of foreign citizens stranded in Libya, notably in isolated oil exploration camps, is certainly difficult. In some cases looters have taken their supplies and vehicles, making it impossible for them to leave. Oil companies that employed these workers had ten days to organise transport over the border into Egypt, or into Benghazi and onto a boat, but did not.

Using evacuations as a pretext to plan or carry out a military intervention in Libya, however, would be utterly reactionary. The task of defeating Gaddafi belongs to the Libyan working class and oppressed masses, not to foreign imperialism or its local proxies.

Many Western oil companies have large holdings in Libya, which holds the largest proven petroleum reserves in Africa and exports most of the 1.2 million barrels it produces daily to Europe. These include Italy's ENI, Britain's BP, Royal Dutch Shell PLC, Germany's Wintershall, and a series of US firms—Marathon Oil, Halliburton, Occidental Petroleum and Hess Corp.

Cables released by WikiLeaks show that Washington—like its European allies, no doubt—was well informed of the corrupt and brutal nature of the Gaddafi regime, but was prepared to work with it so long as US oil companies were given free rein in Libya.

The main aims driving a Western intervention would be to protect the major oil firms' holdings in Libya, create a compliant regime to replace Gaddafi, and try to break the wave of revolutionary struggles in North Africa—most notably in Libya's neighbors, Egypt and Tunisia. Any such deployment must be opposed by workers around the world.

Interventions are being actively discussed by major European media outlets. In Germany, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, "The time for indecision has passed. In Libya, Moammar Gadhafi is waging war against his own people... Europe must issue a credible threat. The best thing would be a coalition with the Arab League, Egypt and the African Union—a coalition which, outfitted with a United Nations mandate, could militarily re-establish peace in Libya."

The paper drew a direct comparison with the Balkans: "A Libya that breaks apart and erupts in civil war could destabilize

the entire region. Since the Balkan wars, the value of early intervention has been clear to Europe. Back then, Europe missed its opportunity. That error should not be repeated in North Africa.”

The conservative *Die Welt* wrote with undisguised anticipation that “what is happening on the far shore of the Mediterranean is the opportunity of a century.”

The US or European powers would hesitate to intervene in Libya without backing from the Arab League, and perhaps direct military support from one or more Arab states, for fear that the imperialist character of the intervention would be too evident. Egypt appears to be a likely candidate, especially due to its military’s close ties with Washington.

Al Arab, a Qatari newspaper, quoted official Egyptian sources, stating that the military government in Egypt might intervene to protect its citizens in Libya. Egypt considered the remarks of Gaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, accusing Egyptians of conspiring in the uprising in Libya—an explicit incitement against Egypt, he added.

Writing in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper, Ian Birrell—who has been tipped to take over as Cameron’s director of communications—suggested that “it is possible the only solution is a rapid intervention led by perhaps Egypt or Tunisia, whose armies have won respect in recent weeks, to winkle Gaddafi out of his air base and end his appalling regime. It would have to be endorsed by the Arab League and such events are highly dangerous and unpredictable. The alternative, however, may be worse.”

Birrell’s proposal is equally reactionary. It would drag Egypt and Tunisia into a bloody conflict, as proxies for the imperialist powers, and allow their governments—as they face a revolutionary challenge by the masses—to demand emergency powers, citing the exigencies of war.

The EU seems presently to be less ready than the UK to seize an “opportunity” for a military intervention in Libya, but planning is underway. A senior EU official told reporters that military intervention was being discussed: “This possibility is one of the possibilities we’re working on.”

At an EU Defence Ministers meeting in Budapest, French Defence Minister Alain Juppé publicly ruled out military intervention. “No. There’s no military intervention,” he said, “but toughening sanctions of any kind that can be taken, in particular of airspace, is worth looking at.”

However, when a no-fly zone was imposed in parts of Iraq before the second Gulf War, it became the pretext for bombing both military facilities and civilian areas. France’s President Nicolas Sarkozy had earlier discussed establishing a no-fly zone.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle insisted, “There is a great deal of agreement with many partners in the European Union here.” He continued, “If this violence continues,

everyone in Europe will know that this cannot go unanswered.”

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen denied that the organization had any plans to intervene in Libya. But he worded his statement carefully, so that it did not rule out actions by some member states. “NATO, as such, has no plans to intervene,” he said. “We have not received any request in that respect and, anyway, any action should be based on a clear UN Mandate.”

The Obama administration is seeking a common position with Europe and the Arab states.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been dispatched to Geneva where she will attend a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council. Phillip J. Crowley of the State Department said, “We believe it’s important to coordinate our efforts with the national community, our European allies, the United Nations and organizations like the Arab League.”

Obama spoke to Cameron, Sarkozy, and Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi about Libya by telephone yesterday.

A military intervention in Libya would depend heavily on the UK and France, which have the most significant military forces and extensive experience of interventions in Africa. The skills of the British SAS and SBS have proved useful to Washington in Afghanistan, where they have been employed in assassinating Taliban leaders. Should SAS forces be deployed in Libya they will be familiar with the ground, as the SAS was involved in training Libyan Special Forces that are now slaughtering protesters.



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