

Clashes mount in Libyan uprising against Gaddafi

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Longstanding Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi yesterday told American and British journalists that he has been “betrayed” by the withdrawal of support for his regime by the Obama administration and its European allies.

Washington is now spearheading contingency plans for an international intervention against the Gaddafi regime, aimed at securing the imperialist powers’ control over Libyan oil reserves and installing a new government compliant with US geo-strategic interests. The Libyan regime’s brutal efforts to suppress the uprising are being seized upon as a pretext for preparations for a bogus “humanitarian” intervention. US military assets are being put in place in the Mediterranean Sea, and officials in Washington are now “actively considering” the imposition of a no-fly zone. The Obama administration has also blocked \$30 billion in Libyan government financial assets as part of new sanctions.

Among the European powers, Britain and Germany have already demonstrated their disregard for Libyan sovereignty by launching air force operations over the weekend to evacuate their citizens. The French government is today deploying two planeloads of aid to opposition forces in Libya’s second-largest city of Benghazi. Prime Minister Francois Fillon described the move as the “beginning of a massive operation of humanitarian support for the populations of liberated territories”. He added that France was studying “all solutions”, including military options. Italy’s foreign minister has announced the suspension of his country’s nonaggression treaty with Libya, declaring that the Libyan state “no longer exists.”

Gaddafi enjoyed the warmest of relations with Washington and its European allies in recent years, and lost their support only once it became clear he was unable to quickly crush the revolt. A BBC journalist asked Gaddafi: “In recent years you had a rapprochement with Western countries, you had important Western leaders like Tony Blair coming here. Now there are Western leaders who are queuing up to say

that you should go. Do you feel a sense of betrayal about that?” He replied: “Of course it’s betrayal. They have no morals.” He added that Obama is “a good man” and that, “The statements I have heard from him must have come from someone else.”

These remarks underscore the extent to which the Libyan dictator had been integrated into US imperialism’s aggressive drive to dominate the Middle East. After junking his regime’s anti-colonial and “socialist” rhetoric, Gaddafi welcomed the major US and European oil corporations into Libya as part of his IMF-approved economic reform plan. He also volunteered his security forces for the so-called war on terror.

Gaddafi has sought to portray the opposition movement as an Al Qaeda plot, telling an ABC news reporter: “I’m surprised that we have an alliance with the West to fight Al Qaeda, and now that we are fighting terrorists they have abandoned us ... Perhaps they want to occupy Libya.” He added, absurdly, “The people who had the weapons were youngsters. They’re starting to lay down their weapons now, as the drugs Al Qaeda gave them wear off.”

Fighting has intensified in several urban centres, as forces loyal to Gaddafi attempt to regain control of towns and cities near Tripoli claimed by the opposition over the weekend.

According to the Associated Press, there is a standoff in Zawiyeh, about 50 kilometres west of the capital, with opposition fighters confronted by the elite Khamis Brigade, which has about a dozen armoured vehicles along with tanks and jeeps mounted with anti-aircraft guns. In Misrata, Libya’s third-largest city 200 kilometres east of Tripoli, government forces still control part of an air base on the city outskirts and yesterday mounted an unsuccessful offensive against opposition gunmen. Several reports emerged that troops loyal to Gaddafi have regained control of Ras Lanoof, a coastal oil-terminal town that is closer to Benghazi than it

is to Tripoli, apparently pushing the government's area of control further eastward.

In the capital, prices for basic necessities including food are skyrocketing, with one resident telling the Associated Press that rice now costs 500 percent more. Long lines have been reported outside bakeries for rationed bread. People are also lining up to receive a bonus cash payment of 500 dinars—equivalent to around \$400, more than a month's salary for most people—issued by the Gaddafi government in an attempt to placate opposition in the working class.

The regime appears to have violently suppressed, at least for now, public demonstrations in the capital. Several journalists, however, have reported ongoing unrest in the working class centre of Tajura, a satellite suburb in Tripoli's east. During a funeral held yesterday in the area for a man shot dead in last Friday's demonstrations, several hundred people angrily denounced Gaddafi.

“Multiple residents described their district, an industrial suburb of the capital, as a war zone each evening since the start of the rebellion in mid-February,” the *Wall Street Journal* stated. “Security police and paramilitary forces patrol Tajura overnight, arresting men and firing weapons in what residents believe is a tactic to scare them into ending their demonstrations. ‘We are strong and we scare them, despite the fact we have no guns and only our voices,’ said Abdul, who described himself as a sub-commander for the anti-government forces in the district.”

As in Egypt and Tunisia, Libyan workers and youth are driving the movement against the Gaddafi regime, in defence of their right to jobs, education opportunities, decent wages and working conditions, and affordable basic necessities. But the Libyan working class, again like its North African counterparts, lacks its own independent leadership. Rushing to fill the political vacuum are various bourgeois political forces that aim to bring the uprising to a halt the moment Gaddafi is ousted. They are working to forge a new regime that upholds the interests of the Libyan upper classes—preventing any encroachment on capitalist property relations or progressive redistribution of the nation's wealth—and closely collaborates with the major oil corporations and the US and European governments.

A “National Council” has been formed in Benghazi, though its composition and leadership remain unclear and have not been finalised, according to spokesmen for the organisation. *Time* magazine yesterday described the scene at the council's headquarters: “Scores of newly minted

revolutionary officials—middle-aged volunteers from the city's professional and business classes—have many meetings but appear to make few decisions. They hold press conferences in what used to be a courtroom, while about a dozen opposition spokesmen roam the halls trying to be helpful but often offering conflicting information.”

Human rights lawyer Hafiz Ghoga is the National Council's official spokesman, while several senior military commanders who have defected to the opposition are members, including Colonel Tareq Saaed, now in charge of military operations around Benghazi. However, the disparate character of the opposition forces was revealed after former Gaddafi government justice minister Mustafa Abdel-Jalil announced that he would head an interim government and conduct negotiations with Gaddafi's sons to end the violence. Hafiz Ghoga repudiated these claims, insisting that Abdel-Jalil had expressed “personal views” and that the former minister would be only be a member of the National Council, not its head.

Washington has rushed to do business with the self-declared opposition leadership, despite the apparent lack of unity and organisation. The Obama administration was no doubt cheered by the news that oil exports have resumed from opposition-held territories. Two tankers with the Arabian Gulf Oil Company, which is now working with the anti-Gaddafi forces, left a port in Tobruk on Sunday with oil bound for China and Austria.

State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley has acknowledged that US officials have “been reaching out for the past two days to talk to a range of figures within the opposition”. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton added: “We are going to be ready and prepared to offer any kind of assistance that anyone wishes to have from the US.” When asked if this offer of “assistance” could involve arming the opposition forces based in eastern Libya, Crowley replied: “We've got a wide range of options available to us. I don't think we've ruled out anything at this point.”



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