

Major powers discuss Libyan intervention

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Representatives of the major imperialist powers initiated a flurry of meetings Monday to discuss proposals for military intervention in Libya.

Foreign ministers from the Group of Eight countries—the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Canada and Russia—began a two-day conference in France hosted by President Sarkozy, who has been among the most vocal supporters of exploiting the revolt in Libya as a pretext for direct military action.

A United Nations Security Council meeting also convened on Monday and NATO is reportedly set to discuss possible action in the North African country on Tuesday.

Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Cameron have both publicly called for the imposition of a no-fly zone, an act of war that would begin with the heavy bombardment of Libya's airports, air defense systems and other targets.

A French government spokesman said that France would attempt to persuade the rest of the G8 that such military action was necessary “in the face of the terrible violence suffered by the Libyan population.” These “humanitarian” sensibilities are recently acquired—the Elysee Palace saw no need for such action to protect the peoples of Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq or Afghanistan against the “terrible violence” wrought by Israeli and US bombardments over the past several years.

The Sarkozy government became the first to formally recognize the so-called transitional government, which is dominated by former functionaries in the dictatorship of Col. Muammar Gaddafi. These elements have openly demanded foreign military intervention and could serve as a cat's paw for a US-NATO intervention, unsanctioned by the United Nations.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, representing Washington at the G8 meeting, is also scheduled to hold talks with representatives of the National Transitional Council, which is headed by Gaddafi's former justice minister, Mustafa Abd al-Jalil. The meeting was scheduled for Monday night and was to include Mahmoud Jibril, the former head of Gaddafi's National Economic Development Board. In a classified cable released by WikiLeaks, Jibril was described by the US embassy in Tripoli as “a serious interlocutor who ‘gets’ the US perspective.”

Aljazeera reported that sources on the National Transitional Council claimed they had received promises from Washington as well as London and Paris of support for a no-fly zone in the

United Nations Security Council. But, according to the British *Guardian*, the Libyan delegation was prepared to ask Clinton not only for US backing of the no-fly zone, but for “tactical” air strikes aimed at destroying pro-Gaddafi ground forces and assassinating the Libyan dictator himself.

Speaking in Washington Monday, President Barack Obama echoed previous comments, declaring that Gaddafi “has lost his legitimacy and he needs to leave.” While he said that the US and its allies would continue seeking ways to “tighten the noose” around the Gaddafi regime, he made no mention of the proposed no-fly zone.

The UN Security Council finished a first day of discussions on Libya Monday without reaching any consensus among its 15 members on a course of action beyond economic sanctions agreed to last month.

The French and British representatives pressed for the imposition of the no-fly zone. Before going into the closed-door session, French UN Ambassador Gerard Araud praised the resolution passed by the 22-member Arab League—over the opposition of Algeria and Syria—urging the Security Council to authorize the no-fly zone. “Now that there is this Arab League statement, we do hope that it's a game changer for the other members of the council,” said Araud.

The purpose of the Arab League statement—which drew a nonsensical distinction between the use of military force to establish and enforce the no-fly zone and “military intervention”—was to provide a fig leaf for the imperialist powers to intervene in Libya, a former Italian colony.

The resolution, adopted by such champions of democracy and human rights as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Kuwait and Iraq, was praised by Obama and European leaders and received widespread media coverage. It supposedly proved the existence of “regional support” for imperialist intervention.

Virtually ignored, however, was a contrary resolution adopted Monday by the African Union opposing “any form of foreign intervention” in Libya and establishing a commission to “engage with all parties in Libya, facilitate an inclusive dialogue among them, and engage the African Union partners... for the speedy resolution of the crisis in Libya.”

The African Union resolution cited particular regional concerns in Africa, of which Libya is a part, including the plight of African migrant workers fleeing the violence and the “alleged use of mercenaries by the Libyan government.”

It likewise declared its support for the “territorial integrity” of Libya and said that it would make every effort to halt secession by any part of the country. Until 1951, Libya existed only as three autonomous provinces—Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenica. There are concerns within Africa’s ruling elites that the crisis and any imperialist intervention could hasten the country’s fracturing along these lines, creating a precedent that could be repeated elsewhere on the continent.

After Monday’s Security Council session, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said that while Moscow remained “open-minded” about the proposed no-fly zone, “fundamental questions need to be answered,” particularly how such a military action was to be implemented and by whom.

Similarly, German Ambassador Peter Wittig said that his government preferred to tighten economic sanctions adopted by the council on February 26 and that “questions are still unanswered” about the no-fly zone proposal. The previous day, Germany’s foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, voiced reservations about military action, declaring, “We do not want to get involved in a civil war in North Africa.”

Among the unanswered questions was apparently what precise role the Obama administration and the Pentagon are prepared to play in establishing and enforcing the no-fly zone. Washington has already sent five warships to the Libyan coast for purportedly “humanitarian” purposes. But Defense Secretary Robert Gates and other officials have warned that creating a no-fly zone would involve intensive bombing and a major commitment of US forces.

Reuters cited a diplomatic official on the Security Council as reporting that US Ambassador Susan Rice had stated that while Washington was “open” to discussing the no-fly zone proposal, it would not in and of itself halt the violence in Libya. She also said that the US “would only participate in a no-fly zone if the Arab countries in the region support it in a meaningful way.”

Diplomatic sources also said that Germany indicated it was open to proposals to arm the anti-Gaddafi forces. Earlier on Monday, British Foreign Secretary William Hague said that providing arms to those opposing the Gaddafi regime should be considered. Prime Minister David Cameron, however, rejected the idea, pointing out that it would violate an arms embargo imposed against Libya and that it was doubtful that anything could be done quickly enough to change the balance of forces.

Dominating the international discussions is mounting fear in the major imperialist capitals that a window of opportunity is closing, largely because of the advances made by forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime in suppressing the revolt.

Speaking before parliament, Cameron warned that “time is of the essence” in getting the no-fly zone in place.

“We would prefer to act as quickly as possible, and we want that our partners on the council have the same sense of urgency that we have,” France’s ambassador Araud declared after Monday’s session at the UN.

The concern expressed here is not over the shedding of

Libyan blood, but rather over losing the pretext for initiating a direct imperialist intervention with the aim of installing an even more pliant regime in Tripoli and securing even more unfettered access to the country’s energy supplies. The fear among the major powers is that Gaddafi may succeed in reestablishing control over the country, depriving them of the pretense of intervening to halt bloodshed.

Military forces loyal to Gaddafi have reportedly advanced 125 miles eastward in the last several days, with the regime in Tripoli claiming to have re-captured the strategic oil towns of Brega and Ras Lanuf on Sunday.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the advance has triggered “spreading panic” in the eastern city of Benghazi, the stronghold of the revolt against the Gaddafi regime. The newspaper reported that rebel forces have “begun rounding up Gaddafi supporters,” and that Western aid groups and news organizations have begun pulling their staff out of the city to Tobruk, near the Egyptian border. Their fear is that Gaddafi’s troops might encircle Benghazi.

In a propaganda move aimed at taunting and threatening the Western powers, Gaddafi called in the Chinese, Russian and Indian ambassadors Sunday to offer an “invitation to firms from these countries to exploit Libyan oil,” according to the Libyan state news agency Jana.

Gaddafi’s right-wing dictatorship previously granted lucrative operating deals to such energy giants as US-based ConocoPhillips, Hess and Marathon; Italy’s ENI; France’s Total; and BASF-Wintershall of Germany, leaving much of the country’s oil and gas production under the direct control of foreign corporations.

Oil shipments from Libya have been cut off since February 19 as ports and large areas of oil production fell under rebel control.



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