Obama issues ultimatum in advance of air strikes on Libya

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Speaking from the White House Friday, one day after the United Nations Security Council authorized US-NATO air strikes and "all necessary measures" against the military forces of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, President Barack Obama issued an ultimatum paving the way for the launching of a new imperialist war in North Africa.

Obama demanded that Gaddafi immediately implement a cease-fire with rebel forces based in the eastern city of Benghazi, pull his troops back from Ajdabiya, Misrata and Zawiyah, reestablish water, electricity and gas supplies to all areas, and allow humanitarian assistance "to reach the Libyan people."

"Let me be clear," Obama said, "these terms are not negotiable. These terms are not subject to negotiation. If Gaddafi does not comply with the [UN] resolution, the international community will impose consequences, and the resolution will be enforced through military action."

As Obama well knows, the Libyan dictator cannot accept such terms. The US and its European allies define "humanitarian assistance" to include the use of Western military and security forces, and the leadership of the rebel National Transitional Council, consisting largely of former Gaddafi cronies, is firmly in the camp of the imperialist powers. Acceding to these demands would be tantamount be ceding control of the country and accepting either the breakup of Libya or its reduction to the status of a quasi-colony of the US, France, Britain and the Western oil conglomerates.

Ensuring the supply of water, electricity and gas to all regions, moreover, is likely beyond the capacities of the Gaddafi regime, even were it inclined to do so. It is, of course, ironic that Obama should make such a demand of Libya when eight years after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, large parts of that devastated country remain without reliable supplies of the same necessities.

The comparison to Iraq is apt. Obama's bellicose remarks, coming just two days before the anniversary of the launching of the "shock and awe" assault on Baghdad, ominously recall the declaration of George W. Bush on the eve of the unprovoked invasion of Iraq.

The UN resolution, engineered by the US, Britain and France over the objections of Security Council members China, Russia, Germany, Brazil and India, all of which abstained, does not represent the "international community." The people of all of these countries, who are deeply opposed to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, were not consulted. Among the Arab masses there is deep opposition to imperialist intervention.

Attempting to justify imperialist military intervention on humanitarian grounds, Obama said, "Innocent civilians were beaten, imprisoned, and in some cases killed. Peaceful protests were forcefully put down. Hospitals were attacked and patients disappeared. A campaign of intimidation and repression began."

Gaddafi, who until a month ago enjoyed the warmest relations with the US and the European powers, is no doubt guilty of such crimes. But Obama's words aptly describe the actions of other regimes in the region that retain US backing.

On the same day as Obama's speech, Yemeni President Saleh's forces shot into a mass demonstration, killing scores of protesters, and the monarchy of Bahrain, home of the US Fifth Fleet, collaborated with Saudi troops to mow down demonstrators and jail opposition leaders, as well as invading hospitals and beating doctors.

Obama's hypocrisy reached its climax when he declared: "The change in the region will not and cannot

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be imposed by the United States or any foreign power; ultimately, it will be driven by the people of the Arab world. It is their right and their responsibility to determine their own destiny."

Only hours earlier, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had made clear that the aim of the military action was precisely to dictate the removal of Gaddafi. Dismissing an announcement by the Libyan foreign secretary of a cease-fire as mere "words," Clinton called the impending air strikes and establishment of a no-fly zone to be only "a step" in a process whose "final result" would have to be "the decision by Colonel Gaddafi to leave."

It is the task of the Libyan working class, leading all of the oppressed sections of society, to overthrow the right-wing dictatorship of Gaddafi. That is the precondition for replacing it with a genuinely democratic government that will attack the entrenched power and privileges of the native bourgeoisie and its imperialist masters.

The aim of the US-backed intervention is precisely to abort any genuine revolution and install a regime even more subservient to Washington and the oil companies. Libya is then to become a base of military and political operations to suppress the revolutionary upsurge of the working class throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

As Obama spoke, preparations were proceeding to initiate what promises to be an extended and bloody air assault on Libya. The president indicated that Britain and France would play the leading role, at least initially, in bombing Libyan air defenses, radar installations and runways. Obama said the US would enable "our European and Arab partners to effectively enforce a no-fly zone."

Thus far, the only "Arab partners" who have signed on to directly participate in the air campaign are Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, both of which have joined with Saudi Arabia to intervene in Bahrain to crush the mass movement there against the monarchy.

Obama was evidently seeking to reassure the Pentagon, which has made clear that it has serious reservations about embarking on a new military adventure in the region.

Britain and France held an emergency meeting with NATO Friday, after which NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said the alliance was "completing its planning to be ready to take appropriate action in support of the UN resolution as part of the broad international effort."

British Prime Minister David Cameron told Parliament that the UK was sending Typhoon and Tornado planes as well as surveillance aircraft to the region. It was reported that Italy had offered to allow its air bases on the Mediterranean to be used for strikes against Libya. Spain also offered the use of its southern air bases.

Canada announced it is sending CF-18 fighter jets to join a Canadian warship off the Libyan coast.

US ships and warplanes within striking distance are in the region, including submarines and surface ships armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles. The naval force includes some 1,200 Marines and dozens of helicopters.

Obama announced that Secretary of State Clinton would travel to Paris for a meeting Saturday with European and Arab representatives to firm up plans for the air assault.

Bloomberg News quoted retired Air Force Lieutenant General Michael M. Dunn on the scale of attacks required to establish a no-fly zone: "If you want a comprehensive no-fly zone, it'd take a week."

"This is an act of war," said Dunn, noting that Libyans would be killed if the US and allies destroy Libyan air defenses.

According to the Pentagon, Libya has about 30 sites with surface-to-air missiles, linked to nearly 15 early warning radar installations.

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