

US, Europe intensify Libya onslaught

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The US, France and the United Kingdom on Monday intensified their bombardment of largely defenseless Libyan security forces, military installations and some civilian sites, including a portion of Muammar Gaddafi's Bab al Azizia compound in the capital, Tripoli.

Hundreds of Libyans have died in the onslaught. The death toll from a hospital destroyed in Tripoli on Saturday was reported by Libyan state television to be 48, with over 150 wounded. Most of the casualties were said to be children.

The highway linking rebel-held Benghazi and Ajdabiya, a city that remains under Gaddafi's control, was littered with the "burnt out wreckage of what was Gaddafi's armour and tanks," *Aljazeera* correspondent Tony Birtley reported Monday. These soldiers were massacred by US jets as they retreated from Benghazi under a unilateral ceasefire decreed by Gaddafi but rejected by the US and its allies. It was Gaddafi's second appeal for a ceasefire in three days.

The cruise missile attack on Bab al Azizia, reportedly carried out by the British, came almost 25 years after the Reagan administration's April 1986 air strikes on the same compound, carried out in the name of fighting terrorism. In that bombing, dozens were killed, including Gaddafi's adopted daughter.

In spite of efforts to portray the US role as secondary in the attack on Libya, Washington has assumed command over the operation. The US military has carried out the vast majority of cruise missile bombings, and on Sunday it conducted the majority of all sorties.

Three US B-2 stealth bombers have by themselves delivered 45 2,000-pound bombs, 90,000 pounds of ordinance in all, making the round-trip flight from their base in Missouri. The long-distance bombers have reportedly destroyed an airfield in Misrata, west of Tripoli. The US has so far fired 124 Tomahawk cruise

missiles from naval vessels.

Italy, Spain, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Greece and Qatar have also participated in the military operations.

The White House and British Prime Minister David Cameron claim that the bombing campaign, "Odyssey Dawn," has already crippled the Libyan air defense system, which was based largely on antiquated Soviet technology. "We essentially have a no-fly zone," a White House spokesman told ABC News.

Yet even though a no-fly zone has already effectively been established, the Western powers have accelerated their missile strikes, exposing the lie that the operation's sole purpose is to protect civilians.

In a state visit to Chile on Monday, Obama declared "it is US policy that Gaddafi has to go." UK Defense Secretary Liam Fox said in an interview over the weekend that Gaddafi was a "legitimate target" of US and allied missiles and bombs.

The Western coalition has intervened in a civil war on the side of a rival faction of the Libyan elite based in Benghazi, whose forces are reportedly being armed by the Egyptian military. After facing imminent defeat three days ago, rebel forces on Monday left Benghazi to attack neighboring cities controlled by Gaddafi's troops. They advanced close to the city of Ajdabiya, *Al Jazeera* reported, but "retreated in disarray when they came under heavy fire from Gaddafi forces."

Should the rebel forces march on Tripoli under Western air cover, the stage would very likely be set for a bloody confrontation. The commander of the operation, US Army Gen. Carter F. Ham, on Monday said that the coalition will now increase the size of the no-fly zone to target other cities, including Tripoli itself, where much of Libya's air defenses are located. "It is likely we will encounter the regime's mobile air defense systems... and will certainly attack them," Ham declared.

International condemnation of the attacks mounted on Monday. The US, France and Britain, while operating under cover of the UN resolution, are acting outside of the official structures of NATO. Formal NATO participation has been blocked by Turkey, which opposes military action against the Gaddafi regime.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Monday condemned the operation as a “medieval call to crusade” and called the UN Security Council resolution allowing the attacks “defective and flawed.” Russia, along with China, Brazil, India and Germany, abstained from voting on the resolution, thus allowing the US, France and Britain a veneer of diplomatic legitimacy for the war of aggression.

Speaking at a meeting of the African Union, South African President Jacob Zuma said Monday his government opposed “the regime change doctrine and... the foreign occupation of Libya.”

Zuma was part of a high-profile African Union committee that had intended to travel to Tripoli to broker a peace deal between Gaddafi and the rebel forces. The US-led coalition refused to allow them to land, however.

India has called for an immediate cessation of air strikes, and China convened a United Nations Security Council meeting Monday to discuss Libya.

In Cairo, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was mobbed by dozens of people protesting the bombing campaign against Libya. Ban had intended to visit Tahrir Square on Monday, but the demonstration forced him back into the offices of the Arab League.

The coalition itself showed signs of fracture on Monday. Italy and Norway both protested the ad hoc character of the war, which has been dictated by the US, Britain and France. Norway said its jets will not participate until a NATO-controlled command structure is established.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini suggested that Italy may revoke the use of its military bases for action against Libya if NATO does not control the operation. Italy is Libya’s closest European neighbor and its bases are important for the military operation, although the UK, France and the US have launched air strikes from their own territories and from aircraft carriers off Libyan waters.

Italy, the former colonial power whose effort to pacify the region between 1913 and 1934 costs the lives

of tens of thousands of Libyans, originally joined Germany in opposing military intervention, but fell in line after the Obama administration shifted to a war footing. Under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Italy forged close ties with Gaddafi and has the most extensive interests of the Western powers in Libya.

According to *La Repubblica*, Berlusconi said that Italy “could not risk to stand aside and only suffer the consequences of the decisions taken by others.” Italy is also requesting “a resolution demanding respect for commercial accords related to gas and oil,” according to the newspaper.

While Britain is also arguing that the operations should be placed under NATO command, France has opposed such a development. Foreign Minister Alain Juppe on Monday said at a meeting of European foreign ministers in Brussels that “within a few days NATO could come in to support” the bombing campaign.

Among the European powers, Germany has been the most critical of the bombing campaign. Foreign Secretary Guido Westerwelle reiterated this stance at the EU meeting in Brussels. “German soldiers will not be sent to Libya because we think this war carries real risks not only for Libya itself but for the region as a whole,” he said, while reiterating his government’s support for sanctions.

France ranks behind Italy and Germany among Libya’s trading partners. Britain places seventh after Turkey, and the US accounts for less than 6 percent of Libyan trade, roughly the same share as China.

In the US, the White House has faced tepid criticism from a handful of Republican and Democratic lawmakers for the unilateral use of the military force without congressional discussion, much less approval.

Obama administration officials have responded by insisting that they “consulted” with Congress prior to launching the attacks. “We take the consultative role very seriously,” a senior White House official said.



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