

# Civilian casualties mount in US-led air war against Libya

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As delegates from 40 countries and international organizations gather in London today to coordinate the US-NATO war against Libya, carried out in the name of protecting civilians, the toll of Libyans killed and injured by US, British and French bombs and missiles continues to mount.

The Libyan government puts the number of civilians killed in the air war at well over 100. There has been no report on the number of Libyan government soldiers killed in the air strikes by the imperialist powers in support of anti-Gaddafi rebel forces.

The US government and its counterparts in Europe dismiss Libyan government reports of civilian casualties as lies while refusing to give any estimates of their own. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has repeatedly said that the Pentagon has no evidence of any Libyan civilian deaths from allied strikes and has even accused the Gaddafi regime of placing corpses of Libyans killed by its security forces at sites hit by US and European air attacks.

According to Western press dispatches, witnesses reported hearing at least 18 large explosions overnight Sunday in the coastal city of Sirte, Gaddafi's birthplace and a stronghold of his regime. Sirte is the next target of rebel forces that swept westward over the weekend after allied air attacks on government tanks, artillery and troops forced the withdrawal of Gaddafi forces from Ajdabiya and the oil port towns of Brega and Ras Lanuf.

The rebel forces, which are led militarily and politically by ex-Gaddafi officials and former exiles with ties to the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies, have stalled some 60 miles east of Sirte in the face of a sizable pro-government military force in the area surrounding the city.

The total dependence of the rebels on air attacks by the US and its allies was summed up in a statement quoted in Monday's *Telegraph* newspaper: "'There are tanks dug into a river bed up ahead and we cannot continue until they have been destroyed by the French or British,' said Benissa Feroj, a 21-year-old unemployed rebel."

The British *Guardian* newspaper, which editorially

supports the war, on Monday confirmed Libyan government charges that three civilians were killed Sunday by allied bombs dropped on Sirte.

The *Guardian* wrote: "Residents of Sirte's beachfront area protested angrily at an attack on Saturday night which killed three men picnicking on a breakwater surrounding a small harbour, packed with wooden fishing boats abandoned by their Egyptian and Tunisian crews when the uprising began last month. Fragments of the bomb were embedded in a shallow crater at the end of the stone jetty—which had no conceivable military use.

"On Khartoum Street, where one of the dead men lived, a woman could be heard wailing inconsolably as grim-faced relatives arrived to pay their respects.

"'We are just civilians, there is nothing military here, only fishing boats and ordinary people,' complained Ahmed al-Hashr, whose nephew Faraj died in the same attack...

"Khami Mohammed, a Sirte University lecturer, accused NATO of deliberately targeting innocent civilians and supporting 'mercenaries and terrorists' in the east.

"'Our grandfathers fought Mussolini and we will fight and live free in our land,' he said.

"Hatred for the Benghazi rebels has been fuelled by an incident on Sunday when pro-Gaddafi loyalists taking part in a peace march were confronted near Bin Jawad and three of them reportedly shot and killed, despite carrying white flags and olive branches."

Witnesses also reported at least 10 explosions in the capital, Tripoli, Sunday night. US, French and British war planes have also been bombing pro-Gaddafi forces seeking to retake the rebel-held town of Misurata in the west of the country and other targets further from the scene of the fighting.

French jets on Monday bombed a munitions bunker in the southern town of Sebha, a stronghold of Gaddafi's Guededfa tribe. The official Libyan news agency, JANA, reported that several homes were destroyed in the town. The government also accused the allies of carrying out a "massacre" in its intensive bombing of Ajdabiya.

Though command of all phases of the imperialist military operation has officially passed from the United States to NATO, American warplanes continue to fly the majority of bombing missions. US air planes carried out 97 of 167 sorties flown between Saturday and Sunday. And while a Canadian general has been placed in charge of the military campaign, NATO's supreme allied commander, US Navy Admiral James Stavridis, is in overall command of the coalition missions in Libya, according to US officials.

In total, 1,424 individual military operations had been undertaken as of Monday since the start of the air war by allied countries on March 19.

The purpose of the London conference is ostensibly to clarify the goals of the military intervention and unify NATO and Europe behind it. This is, however, a difficult task since the US, France, Britain and NATO are maintaining the fiction that the mission, as authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1973, is not to intervene in a civil war or topple the Gaddafi regime, but merely to establish a no-fly zone and protect civilians threatened by Gaddafi's forces.

The facts on the ground expose this lie, as well as the repeated demands by the Western powers that Gaddafi resign. It is not possible to conceal the reality of a brutal colonial-style war aimed at installing a puppet regime, plundering Libya's rich oil wealth and establishing a beachhead to suppress the wave of revolutionary struggles sweeping North Africa and the Middle East.

Moreover, the military adventure by the US, Britain and France has sharpened inter-imperialist tensions within NATO, the European Union and Europe as a whole. Behind the façade of a united humanitarian effort in Libya, the London conference will be the scene of a bitter backroom conflict over the division of the spoils of war.

The UK and France made a preemptive move Monday to assert their claim to the best pickings from an eventual carve-up of Libya's resources. A joint letter signed by British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy demanded that Gaddafi give up power "immediately" and called on the rebel Interim Transitional National Council to initiate a national dialogue in order to organize a political transition. The letter also urged Gaddafi supporters to "leave him before it is too late."

This reflects the attempts by the US and its allies to get key elements of the regime, including military leaders, to defect and join the imperialist-backed rebel camp.

Following the issuing of the letter, the British and French leaders held a joint conference call with President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Germany abstained in the UN Security Council vote on resolution 1973 and has refused to participate directly in the military

campaign.

Berlin fears losing out to Paris and London in a post-Gaddafi Libya. Like all of the powers that are now demonizing Gaddafi, it established lucrative relations with his dictatorial regime over the past decade, including oil concessions.

Another country that is wary of the implications of the war is Italy. The former colonial ruler of Libya, it established the closest relations with Gaddafi of all the European states and has the biggest economic investment in the country's oil wealth. Italy, along with Turkey, bitterly opposed French efforts to freeze out NATO in order to give France a more prominent role in the conduct of the war.

In a piece on Italy's role in the conflict, the US intelligence consultancy firm Stratfor wrote Monday: "NATO command-and-control structures are important to Rome, which does not want the Libyan intervention to remain a Paris-London affair when the United States withdraws from leading the operations, leaving Italy's energy and security interests at the mercy of two countries looking to gain the upper hand in a post-Gaddafi Libya."

Italy's foreign ministry said Monday it was speaking to Germany "about a coordination of a position on key principles for the future of Libya" to be discussed at the conference in London.

Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia, which also abstained on resolution 1973, said the allied strikes on Gaddafi's troops were an intervention in a civil war and violated the UN resolution, RIA Novosti reported Monday.

Turkey, which initially opposed the war but has since shelved its opposition, is also maneuvering to benefit from the carnage. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the *Guardian* that his country was prepared to act as a mediator to pursue an early cease-fire in Libya. He also claimed that talks were under way with Gaddafi's government and the Interim Transitional National Council. Rebel officials, however, denied this claim and said they would not negotiate with Gaddafi.

For its part, Qatar, one of two Arab states to directly participate in the bombing attacks, on Monday recognized the Transitional Council as the legitimate government of Libya and offered to market oil from rebel-controlled areas.



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