

# Italy plans to step up its participation in the war against Libya

**Marianne Arens****20 April 2011**

As the bombing of Libya enters its fourth week, Italy is looking for ways to participate more actively in the war. As the former colonial power in Libya, Italy has substantial oil and gas interests that it seeks to defend against the predatory actions of rival powers.

So far the Italian Air Force has not played an active part in the bombings, but the country has opened up its military bases for the NATO air attacks. These bases are located at Aviano and Pisa in the north, Gioia del Colle in Puglia, and Decimomannu in Sardinia and Sigonella in Sicily. The NATO headquarters in Naples is also involved in the battle operations.

On April 11 Foreign Minister Franco Frattini (PDL) confirmed on the Foreign Ministry website that the government was keeping “all military options on the table” and was examining a possible Italian participation in air strikes. Last Tuesday Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa discussed with his counterparts from Britain and France how to increase the pressure on Libya. The government has also not ruled out the possibility of intervening with ground troops.

At the same time, the Italian government maintains close links with the self-styled National Transitional Council in Benghazi, which it has already recognized as the future government of Libya. Franco Frattini is actively involved in arming the Transitional Council, arguing that “weapons for self-defense” are not explicitly prohibited by the UN Security Council Resolution 1973.

Last week Frattini travelled from one conference to another, often accompanied by leading Libyan opposition politicians. On Monday he visited his British counterpart William Hague in London. On Tuesday he met with Ali al-Isawi and General Abdel Fattah Younis from the Libyan Transitional Council and then took part in an EU foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg.

From Luxembourg he went on Wednesday to Doha in Qatar for a conference that also involved representatives of the Transitional Council. The meeting of the so-called Libya Contact Group, consisting of the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy and other countries, studied ways to arm and finance the Transitional Council. Great Britain and Qatar have already supplied arms to Benghazi.

The Libyan rebels are demanding at least two billion dollars

to equip themselves against Gaddafi. To this end the conference agreed that Transitional Council be provided with funds from frozen Libyan accounts via a so-called “provisional financial mechanism”. Qatar is also assisting the Transitional Council in exporting oil from production facilities under opposition control to other countries.

On Thursday and Friday, the NATO foreign ministers in Berlin once again demanded Gaddafi’s resignation, and during the NATO conference air strikes continued unabated against targets in Misurata and the capital city, Tripoli.

On Friday Frattini planned to meet the president of the Libyan National Transitional Council Mustafa Abdul Jalil in Rome for talks with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and President Giorgio Napolitano. In the event, Jalil cancelled at the last moment because of “urgent tasks” in Libya.

Italy is also preparing to establish a “humanitarian corridor” to war-torn areas in Libya, within the framework of the EU mission EUFOR. This mission involves two so-called Battle Groups of the European Union, each with 1,500 men. Germany has provided the biggest contingent with almost a thousand soldiers, but leadership of the EUFOR force in Libya has been given to an Italian, Rear Admiral Claudio Gaudiosi.

The EUFOR mission Libya had already been agreed by European foreign ministers on 1 April. However it can only become active at the request of the UN, which has so far refrained from making such a request. While EUFOR in Libya is officially a “humanitarian mission” designed to aid beleaguered civilians, it has a “robust mandate”, which means that the soldiers involved can use force and intervene in the fighting.

Italy had initially been reluctant to break with Libya’s leader Gaddafi, with whom Prime Minister Berlusconi enjoyed close and friendly relations. Like Germany, it has expressed reservations about military action. But now Rome evidently fears losing its influence in the former Italian colony if it does not side with the coalition of warring countries.

The true motives of the Italian government were bluntly revealed by Foreign Minister Frattini when he described his first talks with representatives of the Libyan National Transitional Council. Its chief Mahmoud Jibril had assured him “that they will abide by all international agreements with

partners who want a united Libya, and that they will comply with the oil contracts. This is a reassurance to investors such as [the Italian conglomerate] ENI, and this confirms that we are not being left out”.

Italy imports a quarter of its crude oil and 10 percent of its natural gas from Libya. The energy group ENI has invested billions of euros in assets in Libya. Italian construction companies are due to build a coastal highway along the Mediterranean coast of Libya. Following its reconciliation with the Gaddafi regime in the summer of 2008, Italy has been Libya’s largest trading partner and one of the biggest suppliers of arms to Gaddafi.

Conversely, the Libyan central bank now holds about eight percent of the Italian bank UniCredit, and Libya has invested in the aviation and defence company Finmeccanica, in Fiat, Telecom Italia and in the football club Juventus.

The economic interests are obvious, and the government has failed to convince the Italian population that its involvement in the war against Libya is due to “humanitarian” concerns. A survey by the polling institute SWG end of March revealed that 82 percent of Italians think that the military action in Libya is based on economic interests.

In this respect it is politicians of the petty-bourgeois left who have gone to the greatest lengths to sell the operation as a “humanitarian” action. Former Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema wrote on his website, “The decision to use force is always a difficult and dramatic decision that understandably can unsettle a large section of public opinion, but in this case it is a necessary decision”.

D’Alema speaks for an entire layer of former functionaries of the Communist Party intent on defending the interests of the Italian bourgeoisie. In his function as prime minister, D’Alema allowed NATO to use Italian airspace for bombing raids on Serbia in 1999.

Nichi Vendola (formerly Communist Re-foundation, now leader of Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà), the regional president of Apulia, supports the overthrow of Gaddafi and the recognition of the National Transitional Council—a motley collection of former Gaddafi ministers, Western agents, Islamists, and other bourgeois forces.

Above all, the hypocrisy of the Italian government’s “humanitarian” concerns is exposed by its conduct in the refugee question. Although the bombing of Libya will cost billions, the country is not prepared to accept and provide for a few thousand refugees.

In recent weeks around 26,000 refugees from North Africa have risked their lives in overcrowded and decrepit boats to seek protection and a better life in Europe.

Prime Minister Berlusconi has described the refugees as “human tsunami” and a bitter conflict broke out in Europe over how they should be dealt with. When the Italian government endowed them with papers allowing them to travel to other EU countries, France and Germany reneged on the Schengen

agreement, which guarantees the free movement of people, and reintroduced border controls.

The German and French governments demanded that Italy send the refugees back immediately, and the Italian government is now complying. For the past few days, two planes with immigrants on board have left the island of Lampedusa daily, bound for Tunisia. This has led to heart-rending scenes. On Tuesday some of the refugees tried to protest against their deportation by setting fire to a building of the detention centre in Lampedusa.

The website TMNews reported, “Before it was possible to force the refugees to board the aircraft, police had to negotiate for over two hours with the 30 people they sought to repatriate. The Tunisians were crying, screaming, protesting and threatening to hurt themselves. ‘We want freedom, we want to go to France, not Tunisia’, they cried again and again. Eventually everyone was brought on the plane by two police officers, but there were continuing protests”.

Meanwhile, more have drowned during the crossing to Lampedusa. On 11 April, a boat capsized a few meters from the coast. The boat contained 192 people from the Sahara who had set off from a camp in northern Libya. Two women could not be saved. On 6 April, a ship containing 250 people capsized, and a total of 800 migrants who risked the crossing in the past four weeks are still missing.

The fate of the refugees unmasks the “humanitarian” claims of concern by European powers. They use the argument as a facade to pursue their energy and geo-strategic interests. They are profoundly unsettled by the wave of mass uprisings in North Africa, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, and are now seeking to restore direct control over a former colony, Libya.

In 1911, exactly 100 years ago, Italy invaded North Africa and occupied Libya. Under Mussolini, the Italian colonial authorities employed air strikes and poison gas and incarcerated a large proportion of the population in concentration camps located in the desert. Italian colonial rule is responsible for the deaths of half a million people in North Africa and over one hundred thousand people alone in Libya. Only the defeat of the Italian fascist regime in 1943 ended the slaughter.



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