

African Union's Libya ceasefire rejected by opposition and NATO powers

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Libya's rebels formally rejected a ceasefire proposed by the African Union on Monday, following talks in Benghazi.

Mustafa Abdul Jalil and Abdul Hafiz Ghoga for the Interim National Council said they would reject any plan that fails to include the ouster of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

The AU delegation had held discussions in Tripoli Sunday and secured the agreement of Gaddafi to its "road map for peace". The AU mission proceeded with the agreement of NATO and the European Union, but this was little more than a grudging gesture to maintain the pretence of impartiality and a desire to end the conflict.

The intransigence of the Benghazi opposition is in fact only made possible by the backing of the United States and other NATO powers. The US, Britain and Italy all repeated their insistence that no ceasefire is possible that does not include Gaddafi leaving Libya.

Without the military muscle provided by NATO and the backing of Washington, Paris, London and Rome, the rebel alliance would have difficulty lasting a few days. Even as talks in Tripoli took place Sunday, NATO stepped up attacks on Gaddafi's forces around Misrata and Ajdabiya. Spokesmen said 11 tanks were destroyed on the outskirts of Ajdabiya, and 14 near Misrata. Ajdabiya is considered to be the gateway town to the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, 150 kilometres to the north. Khaled El Shayeh, a coordinator between the rebel armed forces and Benghazi, boasted, "NATO did a great effort yesterday. The whole of Ajdabiya is under our control".

The AU delegation was headed by South African President Jacob Zuma and included presidents Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania, Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali, Denis Sassou Nguesso of

Congo-Brazzaville and Ugandan Foreign Minister Henry Oryem Okello.

The deal offered by the AU proposed an immediate ceasefire, the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid, protection of foreign nationals, a dialogue between the government and rebels on a political settlement, suspension of NATO air strikes and the organisation of humanitarian relief efforts. This would create the basis for talks aimed at setting up "an inclusive transition period" to adopt and implement "political reforms necessary for the elimination of the causes of the current crisis" recognising "the aspirations of the Libyan people for democracy, political reform, justice, peace and security, as well as social...development".

Zuma left the meeting at the Libyan leader's Bab al-Aziziya compound declaring of Gaddafi, "The brother leader delegation has accepted the road map as presented by us". He urged NATO to suspend bombing, stating, "We have to give the ceasefire a chance".

But a rebel spokesman had rejected a priori any ceasefire. Ahmad Bani told Al Jazeera television, "There is no other solution than the military solution, because this dictator's language is annihilation, and people who speak this language only understand this language".

After the ceasefire was accepted by Gaddafi, opposition spokesmen queued up to insist that it would not be acceptable to them. Guma al-Gamaty, the INC representative in London, said the opposition would not agree to any deal that kept Gaddafi or his sons in place. "We reject any initiative that provides for Qaddafi and his children to stay on", Abdallah Shamiya, a member of the rebel coalition from the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, told Reuters in a phone interview from Benghazi.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said before the Benghazi talks had begun that any ceasefire agreement between Libyan regime forces and the rebellion must be “credible and verifiable.... We have seen quite a number of announced cease-fires, and they have not been implemented, and for that reason we need to establish an effective monitoring mechanism”.

A NATO official told Reuters, “We will continue to put pressure on forces threatening civilians, and our operations will continue. Our aircraft are still flying, and when we see a threat to civilians, we will engage”.

A spokesman for British Prime Minister David Cameron spoke in the same vein. “We will continue to take military action as required to protect civilians”, he said. “Any ceasefire deal needs to be a genuine ceasefire. That can only be judged by Gaddafi’s actions rather than his words or the words of anyone else for that matter”.

Judging Gaddafi by his deeds, rather than his words, has become London’s semi-official mantra when rejecting his repeated appeals for a ceasefire. Using the same measure to judge the NATO powers makes clear that they have no intention of seeking a peaceful outcome for the conflict in Libya any time soon.

When the AU delegation moved on to Benghazi yesterday, they were met with a carefully orchestrated demonstration that mobbed their cars, chanting anti-Gaddafi slogans and waving Libyan, French, Italian and Qatari flags. France, Italy and Qatar are the three nations that have recognised the INC as Libya’s legitimate government.

“On the issue of Gaddafi and his sons, there is no negotiation,” said Ahmed al-Adbor, a member of the INC. “The sons and the family of Gaddafi cannot participate in the political future of Libya”.

Insisting on Gaddafi’s ouster and that of his sons—a demand for regime change—cannot be accepted by the Libyan government. “No one has the right to send Muammar Gaddafi into exile out of the land of his forefathers. This man will not leave Libya”, said spokesman Abdel Monem al-Lamoushi. But this demand has had the full support of Washington from the very beginning. Responding to a personal appeal last week by Gaddafi to President Barack Obama for an end to the conflict, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Gaddafi, “knows what he needs to do, step down and leave Libya”.

The longer the Libyan conflict goes on, however, the clearer it becomes that a military victory by the opposition is highly unlikely. They have no substantial popular support and their fighting generally consists of charging forward under NATO protection, only to retreat as soon as they are engaged by government forces.

The growing danger of a stalemate has led to growing dissent over the NATO-led war. The African Union and the Arab League both backed the UN resolution endorsing the imposition of the “no-fly zone”, but are now urging an end to the conflict. South Africa voted for the resolution, but now clearly sides with the so-called BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia, India and China, which abstained. South Africa will on Thursday be accepted as a member of the BRIC at a conference in China. Zuma did not go to Benghazi, but departed for the Chinese beach resort of Sanya following his meeting with Gaddafi.

The military stalemate and the political opposition facing Washington is seen in Europe as providing a potential to stamp its authority on events. Today, a meeting of European Union foreign ministers takes place in Luxembourg to discuss implementing EUFOR, a military mission to intervene on the ground in Libya on the pretext of coming to the aid of the besieged population of Misrata.

The operation calls for mobilising the EU’s two 1,500-man battle groups, but depends on securing the sanction of the UN. Germany, which initially voted against intervention in Libya, must play the leading role alongside Italy. On Thursday, coinciding with the BRIC conference, a meeting of NATO foreign ministers is being held in Berlin.



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