

France, Britain step up drive for deployment of ground troops in Libya

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The British Conservative-Liberal government of Prime Minister David Cameron and the French administration of President Nicolas Sarkozy are moving closer to deploying ground forces in Libya, escalating the neocolonial war being waged against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

In a televised interview yesterday, Cameron repeatedly refused to rule out launching operations involving ground troops. “What we’ve said is there is no question of an invasion or an occupation, this is not about Britain putting boots on the ground, this is not what we are about here,” he declared.

But when the prime minister was asked if he categorically ruled out any form of ground force, he replied: “What I’ve said is there is no occupying force, no invasion. The position hasn’t changed.”

Asked about a possible “temporary” ground operation, he answered: “I’ve answered the question. We’re not occupying, we’re not invading.”

Cameron’s statements prepare the ground for a major escalation of the Libyan war. Former Liberal Democrat leader Menzies Campbell told the *Guardian*: “The PM’s words need careful interpretation. ‘Occupation’ necessarily implies large numbers of troops being in Libya for a substantial period of time. The prime minister’s answer could imply military assistance or support at a much lower level, designed to stiffen the resolve and improve the quality of the rebel effort.”

British special forces, alongside personnel from the CIA and other imperialist intelligence agencies, are already active on the ground, in blatant violation of international law. Now, using the pretext of a humanitarian crisis in the city of Misrata, the Cameron government is preparing to send in combat troops. The aim of the allied imperialist powers, led by the US, France and Britain, is to oust Gaddafi, install a puppet

government approved by the major Western oil companies, and use Libya as a base of operations against the revolutionary movements of workers and youth in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt and other parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

The British prime minister declared his intention to comply with UN Resolution 1973, authorising the so-called “no-fly zone,” while at the same time complaining about its explicit repudiation of a ground invasion. “It is because we have said we are not going to invade, we are not going to occupy [that] this is more difficult in many ways, because we can’t fully determine the outcome with what we have available,” he said.

Axel Poniatowski, an influential member of President Sarkozy’s ruling UMP party and chairman of the French parliament’s foreign affairs committee, was more direct. “The exclusive use of air power, as imposed on us by UN Security Council resolution 1973, has proved its limitations in the face of targets that are mobile and hard to track,” he declared in a statement. “Without information from the ground, coalition planes are flying blind and increasing the risk of friendly fire incidents.”

Poniatowski demanded that French special forces be sent in, a move he insisted would not violate the “spirit” of UN resolution 1973.

The European Union has prepared a force of 1,000 troops and drawn up a “concept of operations” for deployment to Misrata, Libya’s third-largest city, located 200 kilometres from the capital Tripoli. The mission, named EUFOR Libya, has its operation headquarters in Italy, Libya’s former colonial ruler, and is under the command of an Italian rear admiral.

According to the *Guardian*, the armed forces “would not be engaged in a combat role but would be

authorised to fight if they or their humanitarian wards were threatened.”

This sweeping provision for the use of force would quickly see the EU forces engage in active combat against Libyan troops. For all the statements issued by the US, French and British governments denying any intention to occupy Libya, the imperialist intervention has a logic of its own.

The US and European media are continuing to ratchet up their propaganda campaign over the situation in Misrata. Just as the purported threat of Gaddafi’s forces engaging in mass killings in Benghazi was used to justify the initial NATO bombing campaign, now the conflict in Misrata is being promoted as the pretext for a ground invasion.

The situation for civilians in the city is undoubtedly dire, but the US and European powers have promoted wildly exaggerated reports of war crimes and even “genocide” for their own ends. US President Barack Obama, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy described the situation in a joint newspaper article published last week as akin to “a medieval siege.” The media has also publicised unconfirmed reports of Gaddafi’s forces using cluster munitions.

About 300 civilians in Misrata—a city of 600,000 people—have been reported killed in the last three weeks of fighting. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said yesterday that the Gaddafi government had pledged to “ensure unimpeded access through the Tunisian border into Libya up to Tripoli and said it would ensure safe passage for humanitarian workers to enter areas where the government of Libya is in control.”

The announcement will not check preparations for a ground invasion. The EU’s 27 member-states decided to prepare the EUFOR Libya force at the beginning of the month—before the fighting in Misrata intensified—and they are now awaiting approval for deployment from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The *Guardian* has reported: “With the situation in Libya, particularly Misrata, getting more critical, diplomats in Brussels say the pressure is mounting on the UN to authorise the EU force.”

Apparently in response to this pressure, Ban Ki-Moon yesterday demanded that the pro-Gaddafi forces cease their military operations, while he did not call on the so-called “rebel” forces to do likewise. “Considering the

magnitude of this crisis as this fighting is still continuing, it is absolutely necessary that Libyan authorities stop fighting, stop killing people,” Ban declared at a news conference in Budapest.

This statement may foreshadow a formal UN request for the deployment of military force on the ground.

Fierce rivalries between the imperialist powers are emerging ever more openly. The French government has reportedly exerted “strong pressure” on the EU’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, to secure UN approval for EUFOR Libya. However, the EU force is largely comprised of German troops. The German government of Angela Merkel abstained on Security Council resolution 1973, but has since shifted its position—keen to secure its share of Libya’s lucrative oil reserves in the event Gaddafi is ousted—and has backed the possible deployment of ground forces. The Sarkozy government’s concern at being outmanoeuvred by Berlin no doubt prompted Poniatoski’s demand for more French special forces to be sent into Libya.

The Russian government, which joined Germany in abstaining on resolution 1973, continues to express its concern. Russia’s permanent envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, yesterday warned of US and European violations of the resolution. “We have information that certain European states are acting more and more on the side of the Libyan rebels,” he said. “We request a halt to the violation of the UN Security Council resolution, especially its clause imposing an embargo on arms supplies to the conflict zone... No one has ever succeeded in extinguishing a fire with kerosene.”



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