

Former colonial powers send military “advisers” to Libya

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Following Britain’s lead, France and Italy announced Wednesday that they too will be sending military “advisers” to anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya, bringing the three former colonial powers back into the region they once ruled.

Like their counterparts in London, representatives of the French and Italian governments insisted that the sole purpose of deploying military officers to Libya was to fulfill the mandate of United Nations Resolution 1973 authorizing a no-fly zone over the North African country as well as “all necessary measures” to protect civilians.

This is a patent and increasingly farcical lie that only underscores the hypocritical role played by the UN in the entire Libyan affair. Three European powers, backed by the United States, are intervening in an ongoing civil war with the stated aim of bringing about “regime change”, i.e., installing a more pliant puppet government that will secure their strategic and profit interests in Libya and the broader region.

Significantly, both France and Italy had rejected sending military contingents into Libya up until Tuesday, when Foreign Secretary William Hague announced Britain was sending “advisers.”

On the same day, French Foreign Minister Alan Juppe had told reporters, “I remain absolutely opposed to a deployment of troops on the ground,” and stressed that such a deployment would not be allowed under the UN resolution, which includes a clause formally barring the occupation of Libya by foreign forces.

Yet on Wednesday, a spokeswoman for the French Foreign Ministry announced, “France has placed a small number of liaison officers alongside our special envoy to Benghazi who are carrying out a liaison mission with the TNC (Transitional National Council).” She insisted that this “mission” consisted of giving the TNC “essentially technical, logistical and organization advice to reinforce the protection of civilians and the distribution of humanitarian and medical aid.”

This explanation echoed that of Hague, who insisted that sending British military advisers to Benghazi had nothing to

do with “training fighting forces or arming them or equipping them,” but merely helping the so-called rebels to “organize themselves to protect civilian life.” He added, “It’s not boots on the ground; it’s not fighting forces; these are not people to fight on the battlefield. These are people to advise on organization.”

The British daily *Independent* described one of these organization specialists as “one of the most battle-hardened commanders in the British Army, with extensive experience of combat in Afghanistan,” saying he would be one of team of “armed British troops” being dispatched to Libya. If these are not “boots on the ground,” then perhaps these trained killers have been supplied with alternative footwear.

Italian Defense Minister Ignazio La Rossa announced Italy’s decision to deploy army personnel in Libya. Just a day earlier, Italy’s Chief of Staff, General Biagio Abrate, stressed that there had been no request for Italian troops and that the conditions did not exist inside Libya for such a deployment.

La Rossa appeared to be somewhat “off-message,” failing to insist on the wholly humanitarian character of the advisers’ mission. “There is a clear understanding that the rebels have to be trained,” he said. “Italy is ready to send the same number of military staff as Britain to be instructors in Italy.”

The Italian minister’s statement makes clear the reason for the abrupt reversal of position by both Paris and Rome. Neither were going to be outdone by the British in a scramble for control of Libya and its rich oil and gas resources. This competition for the “spoils” of the war in Libya will inevitably drive its further escalation.

The decision by the three European powers to send military advisers to Libya comes precisely one month after the US, Britain and France launched the war of aggression against the country. Warplanes from the three nations initiated a continuous campaign of aerial bombardments that NATO generals claim has wiped out at least one-third of Libya’s military, presumably killing thousands of soldiers.

Despite the destruction and bloodletting, however, the air

war has failed to dislodge the government of Muammar Gaddafi and has proved inadequate in securing any advance by the "rebels" who the imperialist powers are supporting.

Now these powers have determined that "advisers" must be dispatched to train and direct the operations of an armed insurgency that they played no small role in instigating. As in the American experience in Vietnam, the logical next step is sending in large numbers of combat troops.

Plans are well underway for this next escalation. The European Union has drawn up plans to send 1,000 troops into the port city of Misrata "to secure sea and land corridors inside the country," as an EU spokesman put it. According to the British *Guardian*, this invasion force "would not be engaged in a combat role but would be authorised to fight if they or their humanitarian wards were threatened."

The escalating intervention by the major European powers has immense historical significance. For the first time since World War II, Italian troops are being sent into Libya, a territory that Italy first invaded 100 years ago. Today they go in the name of "humanitarianism". A century ago, Italy justified its invasion of what were then the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the name of its "civilizing" mission.

For the Libyan people, this invasion produced a tragedy of genocidal proportions. Between the onset of Italian colonization and the routing of Italy's army in World War II, 32 years later, fully one half of Libya's population was murdered, starved to death or driven into exile.

Resistance to Italian rule was met with systematic aerial bombardment—for the first time anywhere in the world—of the civilian population. Caravans, villages and even livestock were destroyed from the air by the Italian military, which also employed poison gas.

The fascist regime of Benito Mussolini saw Libya as a "population colony", along the same lines as its ally, Nazi Germany, viewed the territories to its east as "living room" for the German people. And it utilized similar methods. In 1930, 100,000 people, mostly from nomadic tribes, were herded into concentration camps, where at least half of them died. A year later, the Italians captured the leader of the anti-colonial resistance, Omar Mukhtar, and hung him before an assembled crowd of 20,000.

Italy's record of fascist colonialism, however, was little different in its effect from the "democratic" variety practiced by France and Britain. In neighboring Algeria, which France ruled from 1830 to the Evian agreement of 1962, colonialism was similarly brutal and indeed, near genocidal, in its suppression of any resistance by the population.

On May 8, 1945, known as VE Day, for Victory in Europe, as crowds in Europe and America celebrated the

defeat of Hitler's regime, French forces in Algeria carried out atrocities that rivaled those of the Nazis. Popular demonstrations by Algerians calling for independence were met with massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. Algeria's post-colonial government estimated that a total of 1.5 million Algerians were killed during the long struggle for independence.

And Britain, which divided the region up with France in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and subjugated Libya's neighbor, Egypt, for 70 years, has a similar record of tyranny, torture and wholesale killing throughout the Middle East and Africa. In Kenya, it herded some 320,000 Kikuyu into concentration camps, where thousands were killed and tortured. And it employed similar methods in its dirty war against the independence movement in Aden until it was forced out in 1967.

This is the real record of Libya's would-be "liberators," who claim to be motivated purely by humanitarian sympathy and concern for civilian life.

They see in the Libyan intervention an opportunity for reasserting their power in the region that they once ruled so brutally and a means of countering the revolutionary upsurge of the Arab masses.

For the past decade, US imperialism has employed its military superiority in an attempt to counter its protracted economic decline, asserting its hegemony by means of armed intervention over the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin.

Under the impact of the crisis that has gripped global capitalism since the financial crash of 2008, Washington's erstwhile European allies are being driven onto the same path of imperialist militarism abroad, while carrying out unrelenting attacks on the working class at home.

The scramble for Libya, like the scramble for Africa that preceded the First World War, is preparing the way for inter-imperialist conflicts that lead to global conflagration. Once again, the crisis of world capitalism threatens mankind with a catastrophe that can be prevented only through the revolutionary struggle of the international working class for socialism.

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