

UK government pledges increased funds for Libya war

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The coalition government has agreed to hand over millions in emergency “back door” funding for operations in Libya, amid signs that it is backpedaling on planned military spending cuts.

Defence Secretary Liam Fox said that operations are to be paid for directly from the treasury budget, as opposed to defence funds. The sleight of hand is because in areas of jobs, health, education and essential social provision, the government is pressing ahead with the imposition of its deeply unpopular austerity measures. While working people face unemployment, deteriorating social provision and falling wages as a result, Britain’s ruling elite have set aside tens of millions to fund another war for oil.

Along with the United States and France, Britain has championed the military intervention in Libya’s civil war, so as to establish direct control over the country’s oil resources and a strategic base in the region.

Washington has insisted that London and Paris play the lead role in air strikes against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s forces. But although they are the third and fourth largest military spenders in the world, their resources are paltry in comparison with the US. At number one, Washington accounts for 43 percent of all military spending globally—\$698 billion in 2010, more than five times second place China. It accounted for more than 90 percent of the total world increase in military spending last year.

In contrast, Europe was the only region where military spending fell in 2010. Down overall by 2.8 percent, this included cuts of 0.8 percent in the UK, fully 8.4 percent in France and 1.3 percent in Germany according to figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The cost of military operations in Libya for Britain alone is reportedly £3 million a day, with a single

Tornado jet costing an estimated £40,000 to keep in the air for just one hour. With Air Chief Marshall Sir Stephen Dalton stating that the armed forces are planning on the operation lasting “at least six months”, the emergency funding is a drop in the ocean.

In October, the government announced £4.7 billion in defence cuts over four years as part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). This included cuts of 17,000 personnel by 2015 and the scrapping of the UK’s Harrier jets, the HMS Ark Royal and the planned Nimrod spy plane project. The projected cuts played a role in the unprecedented defence and nuclear co-operation agreement signed between Britain and France last year, dubbed “Entente Frugale”.

The reductions had caused uproar in sections of the ruling elite and the armed forces at the time. With the intervention into Libya, the government is now backtracking. It has been announced that planned reductions in RAF planes and pilots will not take place. Although two squadrons are still to go, crew and aircraft are to be transferred to the remaining five.

Proposals to retire four Hercules C130K transport planes have been put on hold, as has the planned decommissioning of HMS Cornwall.

Fox said the postponement was only temporary and that there would be no retreat on the SDSR. “The financial situation that this country finds itself in has not changed”, he said. “It would be wrong to think that we were reopening the defence review”.

But the *Telegraph* reported that Prime Minister David Cameron was “actively engaged” in reassessing Britain’s military capability. The treasury was to give the Ministry of Defence (MoD) a “reprieve” on its £800 million overspend for 2011-12 budget, the newspaper said, in what it described as the “first sign of compromise on defence cuts”.

Cameron had told MPs last month that he was “prepared to look again at the SDSR and its conclusions amid the Libyan crisis and turmoil across the Middle East”, the *Telegraph* said. It cited a source stating, “Call it what you like, but defence is getting more funding whether it’s through the back door or not”.

“Individual” military campaigns will now be fully funded by the treasury, whereas previously this was split 50/50 between central government and the MoD. The government has also agreed that special reserve funds will be used to pay for upgrades to Puma helicopters and to finance special allowances for forces deployed to Afghanistan.

The means through which the MoD intends to overcome its funding shortfall blows apart the British bourgeoisie’s claims that its intervention into Libya is motivated by humanitarian considerations. The *Telegraph* reports that the MoD expects to recoup some of its spending “by selling Eurofighter jets to Oman”. Protests in the oil-producing nation, triggered by the uprising in Egypt, were only recently brutally repressed by the forces of Sultan Qaboos, in power for 40 years.

The Libyan intervention has emboldened Britain’s current and former defence chiefs to demand a complete reversal in military cuts. Air Chief Marshal Stephen Dalton warned that the RAF was “stretched to breaking point” without more investment. Lord Stirrup, head of the armed forces until last year, said the operation in Libya meant the “locker is now looking pretty bare, and yet we still face huge risks”.

There could be “severe consequence” if British interests were threatened by events such as an Iranian “miscalculation in the Gulf”.

Writing in the *Sun*, Colonel Richard Kemp argued that “events in the Middle East threaten to change the balance of global security”.

“Who can tell what other military action will be needed?” he asked, arguing, “We cannot know the fate of Yemen, Syria, Jordan or even Iran, which may acquire nuclear weapons”.

Labour is leading demands to hike up defence spending. Under Tony Blair, the party led neo-colonial interventions into the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and Sierra Leone. Between 2001 and 2010 it oversaw a 22 percent increase in UK defence spending.

Labour’s defence spokesman Jim Murphy said it was time the defence review was reopened and reconsidered. “We have to ask what is Britain’s role in the world and therefore what military power we need, rather than saying how much we can cut to reduce the deficit”, he said.

The Scottish National Party, which opposed the Iraq war, has also stepped up to the mark. Angus Robertson, SNP MP, said, “Typhoons from RAF Leuchars are also playing a key role in the UN-backed operations. This underlines the vital role both bases play and the madness of UK government plans”.



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