

Rome meeting to consider further military action against Libya

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in Rome Wednesday for a two-day meeting of the Libya Contact Group.

Clinton will set out the next phase of the NATO-led military action. The bombing campaign, which began March 19, has become increasingly savage, but has failed to oust the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The US Secretary of State's task is to maintain the resolve of this now blood-soaked and increasingly fractious coalition, as she cajoles them into further acts of aggression.

The Rome meeting takes place in the same week that Gaddafi's youngest son Saif al-Arab and three of Gaddafi's grandchildren were buried after an attempt to assassinate Gaddafi himself failed. Two precision-guided bombs hit the Bab al-Azizyah complex in Tripoli, reducing part of it to rubble. Gaddafi was thought to have been present but escaped the raid.

The children, all under three years old, were examined by French surgeon Gerrard Le Clouereca, according to France 24. He does not work for the Gaddafi regime and confirmed that all of the children had died from blast injuries. He could not identify them individually because their faces were too badly mutilated.

Earlier in the same day the state television centre had been targeted as Gaddafi was giving a live address. The picture could be seen vibrating with each detonation. Gaddafi left the studio taking off his microphone as the cameras were still running.

A Libyan opposition spokesman welcomed the US assassination of Osama Bin Laden. "We are very happy and we are waiting for the next step", Colonel Ahmed Bani said. "We want the Americans to do the same to Gaddafi".

This enthusiasm for criminality speaks volumes about the nature of the "rebels" who want to replace Gaddafi. If they come to power it will be as the beneficiaries of a campaign that has flouted the norms of international law, and as puppets of the Western powers.

The turn to assassination has also been applauded by sections of the media. In the wake of the failed attempt to

kill Gaddafi, the *Times* (of London), which is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, called for the bombing of "command and control centres" to be stepped up—a veiled reference to further assassination attempts. The Bab al-Azizyah complex, although it is in part residential, is regarded as a command and control centre.

"This is a war", said the *Times*, "that cannot be allowed to drag on".

Air strikes against "command and control centres" in Libya are "wholly legitimate", Foreign Secretary William Hague declared yesterday. Gaddafi could only "open the way" for a political solution to the conflict by stepping down from power, Hague told parliament.

The targeting of Gaddafi is only the most high-profile of the illegal acts being carried out. At the weekend, a building run by the Libyan Down's Syndrome Society was bombed in a NATO raid. It houses a parent-funded school for children with Down's Syndrome. No children were on the premises, but children up to the age of six attend the school to learn the skills that will enable them to integrate into mainstream education. Ismail Seddigh founded the school 17 years ago after his own daughter was born with Down's.

"I felt sad really", he said as he surveyed the wreckage. "I kept thinking, what are we going to do with these children?"

NATO's bombing campaign is now openly aimed at regime change, making nonsense of all claims to be seeking to protect civilians.

Ambulance services have been seriously impaired by the lack of voice communications. Farmers have been forced to abandon their fields, leading to a serious shortage of food in local markets. The Al-Hira region south of Tripoli has been targeted by repeated waves of air raids. The UN World Food Programme has warned that there is food crisis developing as a result.

Since NATO took the lead from the United States, there have been 2,000 bombing raids carried out over Libya. But the opposition has proved to be incapable of mounting an effective military campaign even when stiffened with the presence of scores of Western military advisers.

The *Washington Post* recently quoted an anonymous person close to Gaddafi must understand that in Western observer based in Benghazi who told them point blank that a military victory for the rebels is unlikely. There simply is not enough time to train them, he said. The other option he said was for NATO firepower and sanctions to provoke a split in Gaddafi's inner circle: "One has to conclude: They will never win this war using their military".

The move to isolate Gaddafi personally and secure a split in his regime is also being conducted diplomatically. Turkey has closed its embassy in Tripoli, in line with similar actions by the Western powers after protests erupted against the killing of Gaddafi's son and grandchildren.

Yesterday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters at a televised news conference he hoped Gaddafi leaves Libya "and cedes power immediately, for himself and for the future of his country, without causing more bloodshed, tears and destruction.... A person on whom everybody will agree should come in to rule in Libya in order to restore peace and stability in the country".

From the beginning of the crisis Britain has attempted to use its contacts in the Gaddafi regime to engineer a regime change. Italy, which will host the contact group meeting, has even closer contacts with the Gaddafi regime.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has come under intense pressure from within his own government since he agreed to allow Italian jets to take part in the bombing of Libya. The far-right, xenophobic Northern League has threatened to bring down the government, arguing that the bombings will cause a wave of refugees to flee Libya for Italy, a result they bitterly oppose. Initially, Italy agreed to allow NATO to use its airbases and to take part in policing the no-fly zone but refused to fire any weapons. Berlusconi responded to US demands and ordered Italian jets to bomb ground targets.

President Barack Obama expressed his appreciation in a phone call with Berlusconi. The pair absurdly claimed that Italian participation was "necessary to strengthen the civilian protection mission".

Hillary Clinton will hold bilateral meetings with Berlusconi, President Giorgio Napolitano, and Foreign Minister Franco Frattini while she is in Rome. Washington is clearly determined to strengthen the resolve of the fragile Italian government and to make full use of its connections with the Libyan regime.

On the table at the Rome meeting is what is being described as "nation-building". This is a thinly disguised plan to create a new regime out of the rebel Transitional National Council and elements from within the old regime.

"After all, the rebels of the Transitional National Council (TNC) represent just one part of the Libyan society", Riccardo Alcaro, a transatlantic relations expert at the Rome-based International Affairs Institute told reporters, "and the

people today close to Gaddafi must understand that in tomorrow's Libya there's place for them as well".

Alcaro, who believes that "Gaddafi is fated to fall", doubts that regime change can be achieved by the bombing campaign alone. "The allies thought they could oust Gaddafi easily and rapidly thanks to UN Resolution 1973, but they were wrong".

An alternative scenario put forward by Arturo Varvelli, a researcher at the Milan-based ISPI institute of international politics, envisions Libya "eventually split in two parts".

The allies, says Varvelli, "skinned the bear before it's been shot...the Italian government intervened when it was too late, leaving France in the spotlight. We lost an opportunity to gain the leadership of the Libyan conflict management".

These differences between experts reflect the divisions within and between the world powers.

Shashank Joshi of the Royal United Services Institute in London said that the death of Gaddafi's son was "a grievous strategic error—militarily insignificant but diplomatically disastrous".

He continued, "If the strike had killed Col. Gaddafi himself, would it then have been at least a military success? ... One of the greatest mistakes of the Iraq war was assuming that, with the departure of Saddam Hussein, the state apparatus could simply be transferred to new ownership".

Joshi warned that the tactics being employed by the allies "will harden the diplomatic opposition to the war, from Russia and China amongst others. More consequentially, it will anger the alliance's warier members, like Germany and Turkey, and inflame parts of Arab and African public opinion".

The other major initiative under discussion in Rome will be plans to funnel arms and money to the opposition in Benghazi. This presents legal difficulties, given that UN Resolution 1973 clearly does not cover such plans. But like targeted killings, this too is now a de facto policy.



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