

As opposition leader meets Obama officials at White House

NATO air raid kills Libyan civilians in Brega

Bill Van Auken
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A representative of the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC) met with officials at the White House Friday as the US and NATO moved to escalate their intervention in Libya.

On the same day as the White House meeting, Libyan state television reported that a NATO air raid on the eastern coastal city of Brega killed at least 16 civilians and wounded another 40. The air strike demolished a guest house where, according to a witness who spoke to Jamahiriya television, “a group of Muslim sheikhs (religious leaders) were holding a religious ceremony.”

The television report included footage showing nine bodies wrapped in blankets.

The day before, a NATO air strike hit the compound of Libya’s Col. Muammar Gaddafi. Libyan state news agencies reported that six people were killed in the attack and 10 wounded. The bombing came just hours after Gaddafi had appeared on Libyan television for the first time since an April 30 NATO raid struck a house where he was staying, killing his son and three of his young grandchildren. The latest attack indicates that the US and its allies are continuing a policy of “regime change” through assassination.

Mahmoud Jibril, who is referred to as both the “prime minister” and the “foreign minister” of the NTC, made the trip to Washington as part of a campaign by the so-called rebels to secure increased funding, support and arms from the major imperialist powers.

Jibril, a free market economist who was trained at the University of Pittsburgh, had since 2007 served on Libya’s National Economic Development Board, promoting privatization, economic “liberalization” and foreign investment. He was described in a 2009 classified US embassy cable released by WikiLeaks as “a serious interlocutor who ‘gets’ the US perspective.”

His trip to Washington came just one day after the designated head of the NTC, Mustafa Abdul Jalil--who until February served as justice minister in the Gaddafi government --met with British Prime Minister David

Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague in London, also to solicit money and weapons.

Jalil came away from the meeting with promises of “non-lethal” aid and unspecified financial support, as well as an invitation to the NTC to open up an office in London. The Cameron government, along with its counterparts in France and Italy, has already sent military personnel to Benghazi to train and advise the “rebels.”

Jibril said the aim of his mission to Washington was to secure US recognition of the NTC as the “the sole legitimate interlocutor of the Libyan people”. Thus far, only France, Italy and Qatar have formally withdrawn recognition from the Gaddafi government and extended it to the council in Benghazi.

The importance of winning US recognition was plainly spelled out by Jibril. Under sanctions imposed against the Gaddafi regime, the US has seized \$34 billion in Libyan assets deposited in US financial institutions. The TNC wants to lay hold of this money and knows that it cannot legally be transferred to them without diplomatic recognition.

White House spokesman Jay Carney indicted that Washington is not prepared to extend formal recognition yet, saying that such a step would be “premature”.

Scheduled to meet Jibril in Washington were National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and several members of the US Congress.

Jibril warned that the council is facing a “very acute financial problem” and needed at least \$3 billion to make it through the next few months.

Speaking in Rome last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that the US could dip into the Gaddafi regime’s frozen assets to “help the Libyan people.”

Senator John Kerry, the ranking Democratic member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced earlier this week that he is drafting legislation that would authorize the transfer of some of the frozen funds to the Benghazi council

Jibril indicated that approval by Congress would take too long. “Four or five weeks might be too late,” he said. “We

need this money yesterday, not today.”

Also at the White House Friday for a meeting with President Barack Obama to discuss the ongoing wars in Libya and Afghanistan was NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The day before the meeting, Rasmussen delivered a speech at Johns Hopkins University in which he spoke of an enduring NATO role in a “post-Gaddafi era” in Libya. He pointed to NATO’s “particular expertise” in the “reform of the military and security sectors,” suggesting that, in the event of the successful ouster of the Gaddafi regime, the US-dominated alliance would establish a permanent military presence under the guise of “advisors” and “trainers”.

Russia, meanwhile, issued a statement on Friday insisting that any disbursement of frozen assets would have to be approved by the United Nations Security Council and that any use of such funds to supply weapons to warring parties would be in direct violation of Security Council resolutions on Libya. This includes Resolution 1973 approved in March, which the US and its allies have claimed as legal justification for the ongoing air war against the North African country.

Russia, which is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council with veto power, abstained on the resolution along with China, India, Germany and Brazil.

With the Libyan intervention approaching the end of its second month, the continuous use of NATO air strikes to attack forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime has done little to shift control of the country to the US-backed forces.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who voiced reservations about the intervention before it was launched, announced Friday that the cost of the new war to the US from its start on March 19 until April 4, when Washington formally shifted control of the intervention to NATO, was \$750 million. Previous estimates had put it at \$600 million.

Speaking to Marines at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Gates said, “If you’d asked me four months ago if we’d be in Libya today, I would have asked, ‘What were you smoking?’” Gates added in reference to the Libya war costs that “We’re fundamentally having to eat that one,” meaning that they are coming directly out of the Pentagon budget, as opposed to the hundreds of billions of dollars that have been appropriated for the US wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan that are paid for through supplemental contingency funds approved by Congress.

The approach of the third month of the Libyan intervention also poses constitutional issues for the Obama administration, which launched the war without seeking the approval of the US Congress, or for that matter, even explaining the reasons for the intervention to the American people.

Under the War Powers Resolution, passed in 1973, US presidents are forbidden from sending US military forces into action for more than 60 days without a declaration of war or an authorization for the use of military force by Congress. The 60-day mark will be reached by the Libyan intervention next Friday.

Asked on Thursday about the impending deadline during testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg dodged the issue, saying the administration was “reviewing our role, and the president will be making decisions going forward in terms of what he sees as appropriate for us to do.”

According to the *New York Times*, among the options being reviewed is ordering a temporary “pause” in US military operations in Libya, and then claiming that their resumption opens a new 60-day window in which military action can be continued without congressional authorization.

Such a proposal only underscores the criminal character of the entire Libyan intervention, which, launched on the pretext of protecting civilian lives, has led to increased bloodshed and destruction.

Behind the pseudo-legal pretenses, the aim of this war is to install a more pliant regime in Tripoli, granting US and Western European-based energy conglomerates unfettered access to the country’s oil and gas reserves and providing a new base of operations in the volatile region of the Middle East and North Africa.

The so-called rebel leadership in Benghazi is a conscious and willing pawn in this neocolonialist operation.

Speaking Thursday at the Brookings Institution alongside Kenneth Pollack, the former Central Intelligence Agency Middle East analyst, Jibril asserted that “there is a lot at stake for the US and the free world” in Libya. He said that a new regime installed through the US-backed intervention “could serve as a model” for “other Arab revolutions, such as Egypt and Tunisia” as well for Africa.



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