

NATO warplanes step up attacks on Libya

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NATO has escalated its war against Libya, widening air strikes to hit civilian government buildings and economic infrastructure.

Early Tuesday, bombs and missiles once again pounded the capital of Tripoli, destroying buildings near the compound of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The repeated attacks on the area have all the earmarks of an attempt to bring about “regime change” by assassinating the Libyan leader.

British air and naval forces have taken the lead in the latest round of aggression, with Tornado warplanes carrying out air raids and the submarine HMS Triumph firing Tomahawk missiles at the Libyan capital and other cities.

Among the buildings struck in Tripoli were a police headquarters and the Libyan government’s Ministry of Popular Inspection and Supervision. Libyan government officials said that the ministry housed in the latter building was in charge of investigating official corruption and may have been targeted because of files stored there detailing corruption on the part of former government officials who have defected to join the US-backed “rebels” based in the eastern city of Benghazi.

Also struck in the raids was the oil port of Ras Lanouf, which had been briefly taken by the anti-Gaddafi forces in March before they were pushed back eastward by troops loyal to the government. According to Libyan television, the attack damaged methanol tanks, causing them to leak.

According to figures released May 17 by NATO’s Allied Joint Forces Command, based in Naples, Italy, the Western alliance’s warplanes have carried out nearly 7,000 sorties since March 31, more than 2,700 of them involving air strikes.

The apparent increase in the targeting of non-military installations follows an interview published in the London *Sunday Telegraph* with Gen. Sir David Richards, the senior commander of British military forces.

Richards traveled to Washington last month together with Defense Secretary Liam Fox for a rare two-on-two meeting with their American counterparts, Admiral Mike

Mullen and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, to discuss war strategy in Libya.

In the *Telegraph* interview, General Richards urged an escalation in attacks on Libya’s infrastructure, while asserting that if NATO managed to kill Colonel Gaddafi by means of a raid on a “command and control center,” that would be “within the rules.”

In one recent attack, carried out on April 30, warplanes struck a house where Gaddafi and his wife were present, killing his son and three young grandchildren.

General Richards warned, “If we do not up the ante now there is a risk that the conflict could result in Gaddafi clinging to power.”

He added, “At present NATO is not attacking infrastructure targets in Libya. But if we want to increase the pressure on Gaddafi’s regime then we need to give serious consideration to increasing the range of targets we can hit.”

The British general dismissed any objections that such warfare flew in the face of the United Nations Security Council resolutions authorizing the use of force solely for the protection of Libyan civilians, claiming that this could only be achieved by means of regime change.

“The Prime Minister [David Cameron] and I are on the same page,” he said. “We are in total agreement that the only solution to this conflict is for Gaddafi to go.”

Among the more severely hit sections of infrastructure are Libya’s cell phone facilities.

Libyan officials have charged that the bombing campaign has badly disrupted the country’s telecommunications systems. Mohammad Bin Ayad, the chairman of the Libyana cellular phone service provider, said that the attacks have caused \$1.25 billion worth of damages to the communications sector.

In response to the attacks, telecommunications workers issued a statement vowing that they and their families would occupy phone facilities, serving as “human shields”, to prevent NATO from continuing the attacks.

The statement issued in the name of the 20,000 workers said: “We, the telecoms workers, are present with our

families and children around the clock and in shifts to protect this utility...to confront any aggression or bombing aimed at continuing destruction of the communications infrastructure.”

In a telling indication of the human toll being exacted by the US and NATO-led war, the office of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya reported Tuesday that more than three quarters of a million people have fled the country and another 150,000 are internally displaced as a result of the conflict.

“Our feeling is that the longer the crisis continues, the more grave the situation is for the country,” said the UN coordinator, Panos Moutmtzis. He reported that the UN and the Libyan government had held “very positive” discussions that he expected would lead to the return of UN humanitarian agencies to Tripoli.

With the US-NATO intervention now entering its third month, both China and Russia reiterated calls for a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement of Libya’s civil war.

“We are keeping a close watch on the situation in Libya, and once again all on relevant parties to cease fire immediately and solve the current crisis through peaceful means, such as negotiation and dialogue,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated at a press briefing in Beijing Tuesday.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Moscow with representatives of the Gaddafi government on Tuesday and said afterwards that he had called for an immediate end to the use of force.

“The answer we heard cannot be called negative,” Lavrov said. “The only things that our interlocutors from Tripoli noted today was the necessity of the insurgents accepting analogous steps and that NATO also stop bombing.”

A statement issued by Russia’s Foreign Ministry Tuesday condemning the escalation of the NATO bombing campaign cited “alarming reports coming in of new casualties among the civilian population and an increase in what was already for this region an unprecedented number of refugees.”

Meanwhile, the McClatchy newspapers published an article Monday entitled “WikiLeaks cables show that it was all about the oil,” reviewing a number of classified US embassy cables released by WikiLeaks demonstrating an overriding concern of US officials over the control of energy resources.

Among them was an April 2008 cable from the US embassy in Rome calling for the US State and Treasury departments to exert pressure on Paolo Scaroni, the CEO

of the Italian-based energy giant Eni, which is Italy’s largest corporation and is one-third owned by the Italian government.

The central concern expressed by US officials was over Eni’s dealings with Gazprom, Russia’s largest company—in which the Russian government holds a controlling stake—and the biggest extractor of natural gas in the world.

Most troubling for Washington was a deal under which Eni, which had the largest operations in Libya of any foreign energy company, would facilitate Gazprom’s access to Libyan oil and gas. The Russian energy giant tendered an offer to the Libyan government during this same period to buy all of its future oil and gas production.

At the same time, the two companies agreed to collaborate on the South Stream pipeline project that would direct gas from Russia across the Black Sea into western Europe. The project was seen as a direct challenge to the proposed Nabucco gas pipeline, backed by the US and several European Union governments, that would funnel Caspian basin gas across Turkey to the West.

Both deals were seen in Washington as threats to US efforts to assert its hegemony in Eurasia and North Africa by exerting American control over key energy resources needed by Europe.

The confidential cable called upon the US government to “push the new Berlusconi government to force Eni to act less as a stalking horse for Gazprom interests.” It charged that Eni “seems to be working in support of Gazprom’s efforts to dominate Europe’s energy supply, and against US-supported EU efforts to diversify energy supply.”

What Washington failed to achieve through diplomatic pressure, it may now have succeeded in getting by means of military aggression.

Last month, approximately one month into the US-NATO war in Libya, Eni and Gazprom announced in Moscow that “due to the ongoing situation in Libya” their deal on joint operations in the energy-rich North African country have been placed “on temporary hold.”



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