

Death squad attacks in Libyan “rebel” capital

Patrick Martin
23 May 2011

There is a mounting climate of fear and political intimidation in Benghazi, the headquarters of the Transitional National Council, the anti-Gaddafi coalition that is being backed by the United States, Britain and France in their war against Libya.

Two press accounts in American newspapers that are enthusiastic supporters of the war in Libya give a glimpse of the reality in the “rebel”-ruled eastern half of the country, where old scores are being settled with the same kind of ferocity as employed by the Gaddafi regime in its strongholds in western Libya.

Sunday’s *Washington Post* carried a front-page report headlined, “In Libya, reprisals draw scrutiny.” The report by Sudarsan Raghavan gives a chilling picture of brutal repression of those suspected of ties to the Gaddafi regime, which, since Gaddafi has been in power for more than 40 years, includes a huge proportion of the population.

Former employees of the Libyan government, particularly those linked to the security apparatus, have been seized by armed gangs wearing ski masks, beaten and imprisoned, and in many cases murdered. Dozens of corpses bearing signs of torture and summary execution have turned up in the streets of the city, or dumped in rural areas outside it.

According to this report, “U.S.- and NATO-backed rebels who control much of the east are carrying out what many view as a campaign of retaliation against those once aligned with Gaddafi, according to relatives and rebel commanders and officials. Such targeting raises questions about the character of the government taking shape in eastern Libya and whether it will follow basic principles of democracy and human rights.”

While the Benghazi-based opposition has proved impotent as a military force against Gaddafi, it is fully capable of inflicting repression on the local population. The *Post* report continues: “Rebel commanders have created a wanted list and placed suspects under round-

the-clock surveillance. Secret militia units raid houses without court warrants and often interrogate suspects for hours.... In recent weeks, at least seven former members of the internal security police have turned up dead, their bodies riddled with bullets. Although it is not known who killed them, many suspect that they died at the hands of rebel-affiliated death squads.”

While a rebel security official claimed that detainees were interrogated and then handed over to prosecutors after three days, the city’s chief prosecutor, Ali Wanis, told the *Post* reporter that not a single case had been sent to him, and he called the detentions “secretive.”

An online version of the article by Raghavan describes the political climate in the rebel capital city in the following terms: “Benghazi is awash with weapons. Streets are still mostly patrolled by volunteer militias, rather than uniformed policemen. Gun battles between rival gangs, criminal, even rebels, are routine. There’s growing fear of a so-called fifth column of Gaddafi loyalists who are working to destroy the revolution and retake the city.”

A similar depiction of conditions in Benghazi appears in an article published by the *New York Times* 10 days earlier. Reporter Kareem Fahim described the finding of corpses of former Gaddafi regime functionaries, which “raised the specter of a death squad stalking former Gaddafi officials in Benghazi, the opposition stronghold.”

Fahim spoke with individuals who survived raids by such assassination squads, either because they fought back successfully or fled the scene before they could be seized.

The *Times* account includes an interview with a pathologist at Jalaal Hospital in Benghazi, who said at least a dozen bodies of executed men had been sent there, although he did not know the identities of the victims or whether there was a political motive behind their killing. In some cases, the victims were bound

hand and foot before being shot or having their throats slashed.

This is the reality behind the professions of “democracy” and “human rights” in the speeches of the imperialist politicians who are directing the war in Libya. In his speech May 18 on US policy in the Middle East, Barack Obama declared, “The opposition has organized a legitimate and credible Interim Council. And when Qaddafi inevitably leaves or is forced from power, decades of provocation will come to an end, and the transition to a democratic Libya can proceed.”

The truth is that the opposition is no more an instrument of “democracy” or the will of the Libyan people than the Gaddafi dictatorship it is seeking to overturn. The “rebels” are nothing more than the chosen instrument of the imperialist powers that seek to transform Libya into a semi-colony, seizing control of its huge oil resources and making use of its key strategic position in North Africa to exert their influence on both its neighbors, Tunisia and Egypt, where mass popular movements have ousted right-wing dictatorships and threaten the interests of the United States and its European partners in crime.

In a further nod to the supposed legitimacy of the Benghazi puppet regime, the European Union has opened a diplomatic office there and has pledged its support for a Libya in which Muammar Gaddafi “will not be in the picture.” Only France and Italy, among the 27 EU nations, have so far recognized the TNC as the government of Libya.

At a ceremony marking this event Sunday, TNC leader Mustafa Abdul-Jalil—a former top official of the Gaddafi regime—declared that those powers backing the rebels would receive an economic reward through preferential access to Libya’s oil resources. “Our friends who support this revolution will have the best opportunity in future contracts in Libya,” he said.

Ignoring the reports of disappearances and body dumps, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton declared, “I have seen the vision of the Libyan people today all around. I saw the posters as I came from the airport with the words ‘We have a dream’.” She claimed that officials like Abdul-Jalil “have great aspirations for the people of this country and they have the leadership qualities and skills necessary to take the country forward.”

Meanwhile NATO warplanes kept up their bombing attacks on western Libya, carrying out 49 strike missions on Saturday, many of them targeted at the capital city, Tripoli, where one third of Libya’s 6 million people live. A further attack on Sunday morning struck the Gaddafi family compound in Tripoli, wounding five people, according to a government spokesman.

NATO air strikes destroyed or damaged what little remains of the Libyan navy on Thursday night, hitting three coastal areas, including the port of Tripoli, Al Khums, near the besieged city of Misrata, and Sirte, Gaddafi’s home town and a regime stronghold. Eight ships were sunk or damaged, and fire and smoke were visible from miles away, according to press reports.

It was the first time that Libyan navy ships were targeted by NATO except when they allegedly opened fire first. None of the ships were engaged in military action when attacked, and several were hit while moored in port. No Libyan naval vessel has put to sea in daylight for at least three weeks, officials said.

Press reports suggest an enormous death toll from the two months of bombing raids. Unidentified “Western defense officials” told the *New York Times* that 40 to 50 percent of the Libyan military had been “degraded,” a euphemism that disguises what is likely the killing or wounding of tens of thousands of soldiers, many of them conscripts.

Another *Times* report cited estimates that some 2,000 Libyan army soldiers have been killed in the fighting around Misrata alone—just one battlefield in a nationwide civil war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact