

NATO bombing of Tripoli kills 19 civilians, wounds 150

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25 May 2011

In the most intensive bombardment since the US and NATO launched their war of aggression against Libya, strikes by British and other NATO warplanes in the early hours of Tuesday morning killed 19 Libyan civilians. Another 150 were wounded, some of them seriously, according to Libya's health ministry, the General People's Committee for Health.

The highly concentrated air raid, reportedly led by British Typhoon and Tornado warplanes, included up to 20 huge separate explosions in the area of central Tripoli where the residential compound of Col. Muammar Gaddafi is located. Libyan officials said that the explosions damaged a number of houses as well as a nearby mosque.

Like earlier air strikes on Tripoli—including one last month that claimed the lives of Gaddafi's son Seif al-Arab and three of his grandchildren—Tuesday morning's raid appeared to be aimed at decapitating the Libyan regime, or failing that, terrorizing Tripoli's population and those who oppose NATO's intervention.

The pretense that the US-NATO military operations are being carried out in conformity with the United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing a no-fly zone and measures to protect Libya's civilian population has been all but abandoned. Leaders in Washington and Western Europe make no attempt to hide the reality that the aim of the war is "regime change," and they are prepared to kill as many Libyans as necessary to accomplish that goal.

In addition to the stepped-up bombing raids, France and Britain have unveiled plans to deploy attack helicopters for the first time in Libya. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé confirmed this action, a qualitative escalation of the imperialist intervention, on Monday.

He said that France had dispatched 12 Tiger and Gazelle helicopters aboard a French battleship from Toulon on May 17, while asserting that the attack helicopters would enable the NATO forces "to better adapt our ground attack capacity with more precise means of striking."

"Our strategy," Juppé continued, "is to step up the military

pressure in the weeks ahead while pushing at the same time for a political solution."

While Juppé claimed that the helicopters would not be used to deploy ground troops on Libyan soil, the French daily *Le Figaro* reported that French special forces units would be operating inside Libya to identify targets for the attack helicopters. Such units have been operating inside Libya since before the NATO air war was launched two months ago.

Moreover, the helicopters, which will presumably be providing close-air support for so-called rebel units backed by NATO, will be far more vulnerable to ground fire, including from portable surface-to-air missiles in the hands of troops loyal to the government in Tripoli. The prospect of a helicopter being shot down and the possibility of crew members being taken prisoner make the direct intervention of combat troops on the ground all the more inevitable.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague, speaking at a European Union ministers' meeting in Brussels Monday, declared London's support for escalating the war. "We are very much behind the intensification of the military campaign," he said. "We certainly agree with France, and indeed with all our partners, including all our partners at the EU meeting here today, that it is necessary to intensify the military, economic and diplomatic pressure on the Gaddafi regime."

France's defense minister, Gérard Longuet, told *Le Figaro* that Britain is matching the French helicopter deployment, sending 12 US-made Apache helicopters of its own.

The announcement provoked a brief controversy in the British parliament. Jim Murphy, the Labour Party's shadow defense secretary, warned that the deployment of helicopters would represent a "serious escalation" of the war in Libya and protested that parliament had been "left in the dark."

Murphy and the Labour Party have supported the war. His main concern appeared to be the lack of consultation. "The British people will desperately be concerned that French ministers seem to know about the deployment of British military equipment [sooner] than the British parliament," he

said.

The protest brought a formal denial from the government that any decision has been taken on deploying the Apaches. However, the British *Guardian* quoted an unnamed Ministry of Defense official as saying, “The chances are it is going to happen.” The paper reported, “Government sources made clear the Apaches were being sent to Libya, and the intention was to use them,” despite the formal denials. The attack helicopters are based on the British warship HMS Ocean, which is being sent into waters off the Libyan coast.

On the first day of a state visit to Britain by Barack Obama, the *Times* of London published a joint statement by the US president and British Prime Minister David Cameron in which the two leaders boasted of their war to topple Gaddafi.

“We have degraded his war machine and prevented a humanitarian catastrophe,” they wrote. “And we will continue to enforce the UN resolutions with our allies until they are completely complied with.”

Obama and Cameron attempted to cast the imperialist intervention as a crusade for democracy and a defense of the uprisings dubbed the “Arab spring.”

“We are reluctant to use force,” they wrote, “but when our interests and values come together, we know we have a responsibility to act.”

In this case, the interests are the drive by the US and Britain to seize control of the region’s oil resources and install a more pliant regime in Libya, enabling US and British imperialism to exert military pressure on the revolutions that have erupted on Libya’s borders, in Tunisia and Egypt. As for the “values,” they consist of the hypocritical pretense that Washington and London are championing democracy in the region, even as they steadfastly defend Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the other dictatorial monarchies in the region that serve as their allies and client states.

Washington signaled its commitment to “regime change” on two fronts Tuesday. First, it dispatched US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman to the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi to meet with the National Transitional Council which is based there. Feltman delivered an “oral message” from President Obama that, as far as Washington was concerned, the Gaddafi regime has “lost legitimacy to rule; he cannot regain control of Libya and he must step down immediately.”

Feltman told the members of the council, which includes long-time exiles tied to the CIA and ex-Gaddafi regime ministers and officials, that Washington regards it as the “credible legitimate representative of the Libyan people.” He invited them to send a representative to the US capital.

However, he reiterated that the US was not prepared to

formally recognize the council, as France and Italy have done. Feltman acknowledged that there were “tough issues” standing in the way of recognition, most importantly the status of over \$34 billion in Libyan assets that the US has frozen in American accounts. Granting formal recognition to the council could open up the possibility of it seeking control of this wealth.

Meanwhile, in Washington, a bipartisan group of US senators, led by Senator John Kerry, the Democratic chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Senator John McCain, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, agreed to move a resolution declaring support for the US-led war in Libya.

The legislative action follows the Obama administration’s decision to ignore a 60-day deadline that expired last Friday when, under the 1973 War Powers Act, the White House was supposed to have obtained congressional approval for the military intervention or call it to a halt. Obama did neither, sending a letter to the House and Senate leadership which ignored any responsibility to comply with the law, suggesting that this was no longer necessary because the US military was playing a “supporting role,” including carrying out “precision strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles against a limited set of clearly defined targets.”

In advancing the resolution, the Democratic and Republican senators are essentially seeking to gloss over the constitutional violations by the Obama administration, further obliterating any vestige of control by the legislative branch over the power to wage war.

Moreover, the resolution dispenses with the fiction that the US intervention is bound by the terms of the UN Security Council resolution. The aim of US military action, it states is “is to achieve the departure from power of Muammar Gaddafi and his family,” i.e., regime change.



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