

NATO extends authorisation for Libya bombardment to September

Patrick O'Connor
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NATO announced yesterday it is continuing its military intervention into Libya for another 90 days, extending the initial 90-day period that would have expired on June 27. The criminal bombardment of the oil-rich North African country has now been formally authorised until the end of September. Washington and its European allies are clearly readying an intensified campaign aimed at ousting the government led by Muammar Gaddafi and installing a client administration in Tripoli.

The 90-day extension was unanimously agreed to in a meeting held in Brussels involving ambassadors from all 28 NATO states as well as diplomats from Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Sweden. The US and its allies afterwards stressed that the extended authorisation did not constitute a deadline. Pentagon Spokesman Colonel Dave Lapan declared that ending the campaign “depends on conditions on the ground”, and that Washington will remain part of the mission “until the objectives are complete.”

NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen issued a statement on the 90-day extension: “This decision sends a clear message to the Gaddafi regime—we are determined to continue our operation to protect the people of Libya. We will sustain our efforts to fulfill the United Nations mandate.”

These pretexts for NATO’s war have been utterly discredited. The US, Britain, and France have spearheaded the drive for regime change in Libya in order to reassert their regional geo-strategic interests following the uprisings in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt and to install a regime more compliant with the demands of the transnational oil companies seeking to

exploit the country’s lucrative oil reserves.

NATO leaders now make little effort to conceal the reality that military operations are centrally aimed at removing Gaddafi from power—a goal that is not authorised under the “mandate” supposedly provided by UN. The military campaign has involved repeated assassination attempts against Gaddafi and his family. For the Obama administration and its partners, UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was never intended to do anything other than provide some diplomatic and pseudo-legal cover for imperialist intervention.

American, British, and French leaders have deliberately sabotaged any possibility of a negotiated end to the civil war in Libya between the Gaddafi regime and the opposition forces based in the eastern city of Benghazi. Italian government efforts to resolve the situation by allowing Gaddafi to make a “political exit” were derailed by the demand for war crimes charges against the Libyan leader issued last month by the International Criminal Court’s chief prosecutor.

It now appears likely that the timing of NATO’s 90-day bombing authorisation is at least partly aimed at scuttling the African Union’s demands for a “roadmap” that involves an immediate ceasefire, including an end to NATO bombing. South African President Jacob Zuma visited Tripoli on Monday to meet with Gaddafi; afterwards he said that the Libyan leader was ready to implement the African Union’s roadmap. NATO responded by unleashing fresh airstrikes immediately after Zuma flew out of the Libyan capital.

According to NATO figures, American and European

air forces have conducted 9,183 sorties since March 31. The Libyan government this week reported that its health ministry had tallied civilian casualties of 718 killed and 4,067 wounded, with 433 of these seriously wounded, between March 19 and May 26. Libyan military casualties are likely even higher, but these figures are not released.

The mounting death toll exposes NATO claims about “protecting the people of Libya.” A further escalation is being prepared, with at least four British Apache helicopters now approaching Libyan waters off the contested city of Misrata. Twelve French Tiger helicopters are also reportedly en route in the Mediterranean Sea.

There is also evidence that—in direct violation of the UN resolution’s ban on any occupation troops entering Libya—more US-European special forces are active on the ground, seeking to forge the ineffective anti-government gunmen into a coherent force. *Al Jazeera* earlier this week captured footage of six westerners, five of whom were armed, holding discussions with “rebel” commanders near Misrata. The group quickly fled once they realised they were being filmed.

The *Guardian*, citing unnamed “well placed sources”, reported that the men were British ex-SAS elite troops. The article indicated that NATO is utilising mercenaries to assist its bombing campaign. “Former SAS soldiers and other western employees of private security companies are helping NATO identify targets in the Libyan port city of Misrata, the scene of heavy fighting between Muammar Gaddafi’s forces and rebels,” the newspaper explained. “The former soldiers are there with the blessing of Britain, France and other NATO countries, which have supplied them with communications equipment. They are likely to be providing information for the pilots of British and French attack helicopters, who are expected to start firing at targets in and around Misrata this week.”

A similar report in the *Daily Mirror* yesterday claimed the mercenary forces were being paid by the Ministry of Defence. An unnamed senior military source said: “They are representing Britain—whether it has been denied or not—and the British government has

given the green light for this, via a circuitous route... the government’s denial that we have boots on the ground is disingenuous to say the least.”

London has admitted that there a small number (“about ten”) of British special forces “advisers” in Benghazi, but denied that others are active in Misrata or other frontline areas.

The so-called Transition National Council in Benghazi—comprised of former Gaddafi regime members, Islamist organisations, and various returned exiles and CIA assets—has been hailed by the US and European powers as the legitimate force for “democracy” in Libya. Further exposing this claim, the UN Human Rights Council released a report yesterday condemning the “rebels” for committing war crimes.

The report predictably focussed on Gaddafi’s forces, concluding that “crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed” by the regime, but added that it “has established that some acts of torture and cruel treatment and some outrages upon personal dignity in particular humiliating and degrading treatment have been committed by opposition armed forces, in particular against persons in detention, migrant workers and those believed to be mercenaries.”

These findings follow several reports detailing the activities of death squads in Benghazi targeting people associated with the Gaddafi government. Death squad operations will no doubt be stepped up in the aftermath of a car bomb explosion yesterday outside a Benghazi hotel that has been used by foreign diplomats visiting the Transition National Council. The “rebel” leadership immediately blamed Gaddafi “sleeper cell” agents in the city.



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