

Helicopter attacks mark further escalation of US-NATO war in Libya

Patrick O'Connor
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British and French assault helicopters began operations over key Libyan cities on Saturday, marking a significant escalation of NATO's war of aggression in the North African state.

Four British Apache helicopters based on the aircraft carrier HMS Ocean, docked in the Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast, launched multiple attacks on targets in the eastern oil centre of Brega. Libyan government-controlled checkpoints between Brega and another oil port, Ras Lanuf, were also hit.

According to a NATO statement, the targets destroyed by the Apaches' 30mm cannon fire and laser-guided Hellfire missiles included "military vehicles, military equipment and fielded forces."

French Tigre and Gazelle helicopters also began operations. At the same time, warplanes continued to bomb infrastructure and other targets in the capital, Tripoli.

Apache helicopters have been widely deployed by American and British forces in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The "collateral murder" video released by WikiLeaks last year documented just one bloody incident involving the Apaches. The attack helicopters now in use over Libya are reportedly all manned by British veterans of the war in Afghanistan.

NATO's use of attack helicopters again demonstrates the fraud of the war's "humanitarian" pretext. Apache operations have nothing to do with enforcing a no-fly zone or defending civilians. They are being used to boost the regime-change campaign targeting Muammar Gaddafi. President Barack Obama and his European allies are attempting to install a new client regime in Tripoli in

order to advance their strategic and economic interests in the oil-rich country and across the North African region.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov condemned the use of attack helicopters in Libya. "Now [NATO is] using attack helicopters on land targets, which is in my view the last but one step before a land operation," he said on Sunday. "And of course," he added, "we didn't mean that when supporting the resolution." Russia, together with India, Brazil, Germany and China, abstained last March in the vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 that authorised the war in Libya.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added that the use of helicopters was "deplorable," and said "what is going on is either consciously or unconsciously sliding towards a land operation."

The helicopter attacks are intended to break the military stalemate on the ground in the civil war between Gaddafi's forces and the militia of the so-called Transitional National Council (TNC), which is based in the eastern city of Benghazi. NATO has reportedly found it difficult to target many of the Libyan leader's ground forces with warplanes and surveillance aircraft, as the fighters are operating in small units and using unmarked utility vehicles while active in contested urban centres. British and French commanders no doubt hope the low-flying helicopter gunships will terrorise the ranks of the Libyan military.

The *Guardian* reported that the initial Apache strikes in and around Brega were also intended to "encourage rebel fighters in the east, who had shown an aversion to combat, to move forward."

The escalation of the fighting in Libya's contested coastal cities will inevitably be accompanied by more civilian deaths and injuries. At the same time, the attack helicopters are vulnerable to anti-aircraft and other ground fire, greatly increasing the likelihood of coalition casualties. NATO commanders are demonstrating ever greater recklessness, reflecting concern over their failure to quickly defeat Gaddafi. The British media yesterday cited unnamed officials admitting "frustration at the failure so far to deliver a knockout blow."

British Defence Secretary Liam Fox declared that the Apaches' deployment was a "logical extension of what we have already been doing." He continued: "This gives us a chance to target new targets in a way we weren't able to do. What it does show is our willingness to use the range of assets we have to keep the pressure up."

British Foreign secretary William Hague stressed the indefinite character of the war. Asked during a BBC interview if there could be ongoing bombing this Christmas, nearly seven months from now, he replied: "Well, we're not going to set a deadline. You're asking about Christmas and who knows? It could be days or weeks or months."

These remarks follow NATO's announcement last week that military operations in Libya were to be authorised for another 90 days, until late September.

On Saturday, Hague and British International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell visited Benghazi, which is now home to the largest British diplomatic office in North Africa after Cairo. The visit served to demonstrate the role of the Transitional National Council as a proxy force for the imperialist powers. The self-appointed "rebel" leadership in Benghazi is comprised of former Gaddafi ministers, leaders of Islamist organisations, and various exile figures, some of whom have long been on the payroll of the CIA and other foreign intelligence agencies.

Hague nevertheless described the TNC as the "legitimate representative of the Libyan people." He said he was visiting the eastern city "as part of a coordinated and strategic approach to Libya—ensuring that our military, diplomatic and development actions are aligned."

The foreign secretary later added that his discussions with senior TNC figures involved detailed plans for a post-Gaddafi administration. "We are also encouraging the National Transitional Council to put more flesh on their proposed transition, to lay out in more detail this coming week what would happen on the day that Gaddafi went," he explained. "Who would be running what, how a new government would be formed."

Hague no doubt sought assurances that BP and other British oil interests will not be left out when contracts to exploit Libya's lucrative oil reserves are renegotiated after the war.

The predatory and criminal character of the US-NATO operation becomes ever more apparent the longer it drags on. Washington, London and Paris hope to not only seize control of Libya, but also increase their influence in neighbouring states that have been convulsed by revolutionary uprisings. The NATO powers aim to use Tripoli as a centre of operations throughout North Africa, preventing any further erosion of their strategic and economic interests in the region.

Hague pointed to these calculations when he referred to the "stabilisation" of Tunisia and Egypt as an aim of the war against Libya—the first time a senior political figure involved in the military campaign has publicly raised this issue. The foreign secretary told the BBC: "If we were not doing this, Gaddafi would have overrun, by force, the whole of Libya ... destabilising Tunisia and Egypt at the same time, with terrible consequences for Europe and for this country. So it's in our own national interest, as well as right."



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