

Britain and France insist bombing of Libya must continue

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Britain and France have flatly rejected a call by Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini for a ceasefire in Libya, highlighting growing tensions within NATO over its air war to oust Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

On Wednesday, after NATO bombing raids on Sunday and Monday killed Libyan civilians, Frattini declared: “The humanitarian end of military operations is essential to allow for immediate aid.” This included areas around Tripoli and the rebel-held city of Misrata, he said. “With regard to NATO, it is fair to ask for increasingly detailed information on results as well as precise guidelines on the dramatic errors involving civilians.”

Frattini’s comment followed a call earlier this week by the outgoing head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, for a ceasefire and a political solution in Libya. Moussa had played a key role in enlisting Arab support for the war against Libya.

British Prime Minister David Cameron ruled out any pause in the relentless bombing campaign, telling parliament that the NATO-led alliance was “holding strong” and that the UK was capable of maintaining the air war against Libya for as long as necessary. “I think it is vital and I would argue that the pressure is building on Gaddafi—time is on our side, not on Gaddafi’s side.”

In what has become a familiar refrain, Cameron again declared that the Libyan regime was on the brink of collapse. “When you look at what’s happening in Libya, where you see a strengthening of the revolt in the west of Libya, you see more people deserting Gaddafi’s regime,” he said. Whatever Gaddafi’s exact political situation, such rhetoric has more to do with the frustration over NATO’s failure to oust him, the inability of NATO-backed rebels to make any significant advance on Tripoli

and the growing anti-war sentiment in Europe and the US.

This last consideration is certainly what is motivating Frattini and the Italian government, not any concern for Libyan civilians. Just three days before Frattini’s comments, Northern League leader Umberto Bossi, a key partner in the ruling coalition, called for an end to Italy’s participation in the war. The Northern League’s opposition to the bombing campaign, on the racist grounds that it will send a flood of North African immigrants into Italy, is a right-wing bid to capitalise on broad hostility to the war.

French foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero responded to Frattini by repeating the lie that the purpose of the NATO bombing campaign was to protect Libyan civilians. “Any pause in operations would risk allowing [Gaddafi] to play for time and to reorganise. In the end, it would be the civilian population that would suffer from the smallest sign of weakness on our behalf,” he said.

The bombing campaign has been accompanied by a propaganda war to demonise Gaddafi. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week repeated unsubstantiated claims by International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo that Gaddafi had ordered soldiers to carry out mass rape.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both declared their organisations have not been able to find any evidence of such abuses. Senior Amnesty adviser Donatella Rovera, who was in Libya for three months, told the *Independent*: “We have not found any evidence or a single victim of rape or a doctor who knew about somebody being raped.”

As has been clear from the outset, the real aim of the

US, Britain, France and their allies is to oust Gaddafi and install a pliant regime that will service their economic and strategic interests in oil-rich Libya and throughout the region. To that end, the NATO-led alliance has been fostering the self-styled Transitional National Council (TNC) in Benghazi—comprised of ex-Gaddafi ministers, Islamist leaders and exiles—as an alternative administration.

This week China became the latest country to give limited recognition to the TNC. After meeting with TNC leader Mahmoud Jibril in Beijing, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi described the grouping as a “major political force” and “an important dialogue partner.” In comments to Al Jazeera television, TNC member Muhammad Nasr hailed “the gesture [as] a strong signal that the Libyans have made great achievements and that the Gaddafi regime will end soon.”

China, which abstained on the UN resolution that provided a diplomatic fig leaf for the bombing, is simply seeking to cover all bases, however. The NATO-led military intervention cut directly across substantial Chinese investments in Libya, forcing Beijing to organise the emergency evacuation of thousands of Chinese nationals. Yang’s chief interest in meeting with Jibril was to ensure that the TNC would protect Chinese citizens and assets in territory under its control.

The TNC’s anti-democratic character was evident in its “provisional constitution for the transitional period” of a post-Gaddafi Libya, announced last weekend. Fathi Mohammed Baja, TNC head of political affairs, was at pains to assure reporters the document was “not a constitution”, saying: “We want to avoid at all cost giving the impression that this is the [TNC] in Benghazi deciding the future of Libya.”

Yet that is precisely what the TNC, with a pack of Western advisers, is seeking to do. While TNC members have pledged not to run for office, no presidential elections would be held for at least 10 to 13 months after the fall of Tripoli. In the interim, the unelected TNC would run the country’s affairs.

Significantly, the “provisional constitution” proposes an expansion of the TNC from 45 to 60 members following the ousting of Gaddafi. Significantly 10 of those unelected positions have been reserved for ex-Gaddafi officials—an

obvious attempt to woo support from within the Tripoli regime in order to topple Gaddafi. TNC health minister Naji Barakat told the *Christian Science Monitor*: “Too many people have collaborated with the Gaddafi regime. We can’t execute or imprison all of them.” He declared that “only 30 to 40 people” would be excluded from any post-Gaddafi administration.

TNC executive committee member Mahmoud Shammam acknowledged this week that the rebel grouping had been in talks, through foreign mediators, with senior members of the Tripoli administration to discuss “the mechanism of the departure of Gaddafi.”

Far from ushering in a new, democratic Libya, what is being prepared is a regime based on the anti-Gaddafi factions of the Libyan ruling elite that are most subservient to the US and its European allies. A senior British diplomat told the Associated Press that a team of officials from the UK, US, Italy, Turkey, Denmark and other nations has been in Benghazi for several weeks thrashing out the details with the TNC of the proposed post-Gaddafi order.

A central preoccupation of the international team was to get oil exports flowing as quickly as possible. “The plans, which are expected to be completed next week, include a proposed timetable for resuming oil production in Libya’s east,” the Associated Press wrote. “Officials believe there is little serious damage there to hamper production and predict work could begin again three to four weeks after Gaddafi leaves office.”



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