France arms anti-Gaddafi forces

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France this week acknowledged that it had supplied weapons to oppositionists fighting Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's forces in Libya.

Le Figaro said that the consignment consisted of "rocket launchers, assault rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank missiles." The weapons were dropped by parachute to opposition fighters—mainly Berbers—in the Nafusa Mountains, western Libya on the border with Tunisia.

The move was opposed by Russia, China, and India. Russia's NATO envoy Dmitry Rogozin said it meant that "individual NATO countries have basically started giving direct military aid to one of the warring sides," and that it constituted "direct interference in an internal conflict."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said it represented a "flagrant violation" of United National Security Council Resolution 1970, which imposed an arms embargo on Libya in February. It preceded the March 17 UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which imposed a no-fly zone and sanctioned war based on the claim that its purpose was protecting civilians.

The African Union also condemned the weapons drop. AU Commission Chief Jean Ping said that move increased the "risk of civil war, risk of partition of the country, the risk of Somalia-sation of the country, risk of having arms everywhere... with terrorism", which would be of "concern [to] the neighbouring countries."

This was rejected by France's UN ambassador Gerard Araud, who declared: "we decided to provide self-defence weapons to the civilian populations because we considered these populations were under threat."

French military spokesman Colonel Thierry Burkhard argued that the supplies consisted only of "self-defence assets," and that only "light munitions and weapons" were involved.

France denied that the move was in violation of UN mandates. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said that the move was "within the frameworks of Resolutions 1970 and 1973". UNSCR 1973 authorised "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, "notwithstanding paragraph 9 of resolution 1970"—a reference to the arms embargo.

As from the beginning of the assault on Libya, "humanitarian" considerations are used as a cynical pretext for the agenda of regime-change being pursued by the western powers.

For five months, the United States, Britain and France, aided by 14 other nations, have sought to exploit and exacerbate the civil war in Libya to this end. Hundreds of sorties daily are being conducted to assist various rebel forces, under the umbrella of the Transitional National Council, with the aim of obliterating Gaddafi's forces and intimidating the population.

The *Army Times* reported that, since March 31, the US "has flown a total of 3,475 sorties in support of OUP [Operation Unified Protector]. Of those, 801 were strike sorties, 132 of which actually dropped ordnance".

Nonetheless, the forces opposing Gaddafi remain divided and weak. Lacking any significant base of support across the country as a whole, the main base of opposition has been in the eastern city of Benghazi—home to the TNC. Considered to be Libya's government-in-waiting, it is headed by former members of the Gaddafi regime and western intelligence assets.

The French arms drop sought to open up another front in the civil war for the NATO powers. It was aimed at reinforcing an offensive by Nafusa rebels—backed by NATO warplanes—that had taken them to within 50 miles of the capital.

The civil war here is considered strategic for the capture of Tripoli, with Nafusa providing a southern route into the capital. Another target is the city of Zawiya—currently held by government troops and home to Gaddafi's last working refinery.

It was reported last week that Nafusa rebels had cut an oil pipeline to the city. According to the *Economist*, if the government "were to lose Zawiya and its refinery, the game would probably be up".

While it is known that Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have supplied rebels in Western Libya with weapons, it is the first time that a NATO member country has admitted doing so.

The US and Britain sought to distance themselves from the move, but Juppé said France had "informed our partners in NATO and the Security Council about these deliveries."

This was confirmed by a *Financial Times* report that cited a

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British official who said the UK had been "aware for some weeks" of the French move. "I am surprised the French have gone public on this," he told the *FT*.

In fact, the French disclosure is widely regarded as a means of pressing for more direct involvement by other NATO powers militarily "on the ground".

The *FT* said that "some NATO officials" believed it was intended to "lead to a debate inside NATO as to whether more should be done on this scale".

"There are many people who think the time has come to get serious", the newspaper reported, citing a NATO official in Brussels. "The fact that the French are prepared to let the news media know they are doing this kind of thing reflects that."

Given the already daily bombardments, systematic efforts to assassinate Gaddafi and his family, and the politically-motivated use of war crimes charges to threaten his closest allies, the demand to "get serious" marks a chilling escalation in the NATO intervention.

Mahmoud Jabril of the TNC demanded that foreign deliveries of munitions must be made to anti-Gaddafi forces immediately to "decide this battle quickly".

On Thursday it was reported that the opposition in Misrata had said they too were involved in talks with France to supply weapons and ammunition. Rebels based in Misrata—130 miles east of Tripoli—have failed to make any progress despite NATO backing.

"We are in discussion with France to supply us with the guns," military spokesman Ibrahim Betalmal said. "We are trying to do our best to get ammunition and guns from France and inshallah [God willing] we are going to get those guns. These are negotiations with France, not with NATO."

Confirmation of the French arms drop coincided with the disclosure that officials from the UK's Department for International Development had drawn up a 50-page document, advising the TNC on the administration of a post-Gaddafi Libya.

The document, which has not been published, was reportedly handed over to the TNC earlier this week and is to be discussed next month by the Libya "contact group" meeting in Istanbul.

The document is the work of the UK's new International Stabilisation Response Team, which includes "experts in areas such as economics, infrastructure, essential public services, security and justice systems and politics."

The dossier splits "stabilisation" efforts in the country into three phases—prior to Gaddafi's fall, the 30-days immediately after and the "medium-term future".

Andrew Mitchell, UK international development secretary, said the dossier was not dictating to the TNC how it should make the transition to a new government. The whole process must be "Libyan-owned," he said.

This was belied by his statement that the US, Britain and the UN would have a "strong input" into political arrangements post-Gaddafi. According to the *Guardian*, Mitchell also stated that NATO, the UN and the European Union would "take the lead on issues of security and justice; Australia, Turkey and the UN would help with basic services; Turkey, the US and the international financial institutions would lead on the economy."

In acknowledgement of the fragmented character of the opposition, the dossier reportedly deals with issues ranging "from preventing looting and revenge attacks to providing basic services, and ensuring effective communications to ensure Libyan citizens know what is happening at a time of uncertainty."

Mitchell said the central question was to learn lessons from the mistakes of the Iraq war. Specifically, this meant not repeating the error of "de-Ba'athification" that took place in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It is considered necessary to instead retain the army and security forces in order to put down popular opposition. "When Tripoli falls, someone should get on the phone to the former Tripoli head of police and tell him he's got a job," Mitchell said.

The *Guardian* reported, "Unarmed UN monitors would most likely police a ceasefire if the environment was 'benign,' but there are discussions about a heavier peacekeeping force. Turkey, NATO's only Muslim member, is expected to play a key part."

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