As military operations stall, US recognises Libyan rebels

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The Obama administration, along with dozens of European and Middle Eastern countries, formally recognised the rebel Transitional National Council (TNC) as Libya's "legitimate" government during a summit yesterday in Turkey. The diplomatic move reflects considerable frustration in Washington that NATO's four-month air war and numerous assassination attempts have failed to remove Muammar Gaddafi from power in the oil and gas-rich North African country.

Based in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, the TNC is made up of former Gaddafi ministers, Islamic fundamentalists and others who have conspired against Gaddafi for years on behalf of western intelligence agencies. With the undoubted encouragement of the French, British and American governments, it was formed in March to corral popular unrest against Gaddafi's regime behind an imperialist-backed civil war.

Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, explained the calculations behind recognising the unelected and unrepresentative TNC as Libya's government. "We still have to work through various legal issues," Clinton told journalists, "but we expect this step on recognition will enable the TNC to access additional sources of funding."

An American-Libyan advising the "rebels" told the *Los Angeles Times* on Thursday that the TNC was currently "broke." It was unable to pay for fuel shipments or its fighters' salaries, let alone purchase new weapons and ammunition.

The TNC can now lay claim to the estimated $US30 billion in Libyan assets deposited at US-based financial institutions, which were frozen as a result of UN sanctions against Gaddafi's regime. Portions of the money will either be directly delivered to the TNC or used as collateral on loans. Billions more in assets—estimated to total $130 billion—are frozen in various European countries and internationally. The Italian government has already announced it will make $US142 million available to the TNC, using deposited funds as security.

The resources can be used to purchase munitions and supplies, hire mercenaries and bribe pro-Gaddafi forces into changing sides. Above all, however, the expropriation of the Libyan elite's wealth sends a clear signal to Gaddafi's inner circle that their material interests depend upon sidelining the ageing dictator and coming to terms with the major powers.

Recognition of the TNC came as the military situation reached a complete stalemate. Rebel fighters under the TNC's command are poorly-equipped and poorly-trained. Many of its fighters, particularly in the west, have been recruited on the basis of tribal or regional grievances and have little motivation to fight beyond their own villages and towns. They have failed to make any significant advances on the ground against army units loyal to Gaddafi, despite US and European aircraft massacring unknown numbers of Libyan soldiers.

The capital Tripoli, home to a quarter of the country's population, is still firmly in the control of Gaddafi's government, as are the major oil fields, refineries and water processing plants. Offensives by the "rebels" toward Tripoli have repeatedly collapsed into disorganised routs in both the east and west of the country.

There are growing questions among NATO allies about the character of the TNC fighters. On Thursday, the *New York Times* published an article, drawn from US military sources, that raised concerns over the "rebel" capture of

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hundreds of hand-held anti-aircraft missiles. Gaddafi's military is believed to have a stockpile of more than 20,000 such weapons. The newspaper's sources reported people ransacking arms depots unchecked and carrying away missiles.

It is common knowledge that elements of the Libyan opposition are Islamic fundamentalists who sympathise with the resistance being waged in Afghanistan to the US and NATO occupation of the country. Andrew Shapiro, Obama's assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, told the *Times* that the prospect of missiles being exported from Libya was "one of the things that keep me up at night."

TNC forces in the east made another failed attempt this week to advance toward the capital, and are now focussed solely on seizing control of Brega, the nearest city to Libya's most important oil refineries. Over the past several days, reports indicate that battles have been fought on its outskirts. Reports by western journalists, echoing the sentiment of US and European military observers, complained that the focus on Brega had allowed pro-Gaddafi forces to recapture the strategic town of Asabah, 80 kilometres from Tripoli.

The war on Libya has become a debacle and source of immense frustration in both Washington and the capitals of Europe. While yesterday's conference witnessed the usual statements that "Gaddafi must go," there are strong indications that at least some of the NATO powers are now prepared to accept a settlement that would allow Gaddafi to remain in Libya, possibly even in some form of official position.

According to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the dictator's son and a powerbroker in his own right, the French administration of President Nicolas Sarkozy has made offers of a deal that would see the TNC compelled to enter a "national unity" government with the Gaddafi regime. French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet gave credence to the claim this week by calling on the TNC to "sit around a table" with the regime and accept that Gaddafi himself could be "in another room in his palace, with another title."

One over-riding concern of US, British and French imperialism is that Libya's considerable energy resources come under their direct sway. The major powers exploited Gaddafi's repression of social unrest earlier in the year to justify a military intervention that is aimed at establishing the TNC as a puppet regime in order to further their economic and strategic interests in Libya and throughout the region.

Underscoring the fraud of the US and NATO claims that the war is being fought to protect civilian lives, even the western media has been compelled to note that rebel units are indiscriminately firing rockets into Gaddafi-held towns and villages.

The greatest civilian casualties, however, are being inflicted by the bombing missions of American and European aircraft.

Mohammed Zikri al-Mahjoubi, Libya's prosecutor general, announced on Wednesday that he was laying criminal charges against NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen for "deliberate aggression against innocent civilians, the murder of children, as well as trying to overthrow the Libyan regime."

Mahjoubi told a press conference: "As NATO secretary general, Rasmussen is responsible for the actions of this organisation, which has attacked an unarmed people, killing 1,108 civilians and wounding 4,537 others in bombardments of Tripoli and other cities and villages."

This death toll cannot be confirmed, but it is indisputable that the thousands of air strikes carried out by NATO have caused hundreds of deaths and many more injuries.

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