

Charges mount of NATO war crimes in Libya

Patrick Martin
6 August 2011

The Italian government has demanded an investigation into whether a NATO warship engaged in the war against Libya ignored the plight of a boatload of refugees, contributing to the deaths of as many as 100 people from hunger and thirst.

The vessel arrived at Lampedusa, an Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and Libya, with 270 survivors crammed onto a 65-foot-long boat. The boat had issued an SOS after its engine broke down, but an unidentified NATO warship ignored the appeal.

The survivors said the bodies of the dead had been thrown into the sea during the harrowing journey. They said they had first encountered a Cypriot tugboat, which gave them life rafts and notified Italian authorities.

Italy informed NATO, which had a warship 27 miles away, but the warship's assistance was denied. The refugee boat was finally reached by Italian coastguard vessels and a helicopter when it was 90 miles south of Lampedusa.

The International Organization for Migration said the vessel had left the Libyan coast near Tripoli on Saturday, jammed with African migrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad and Morocco, and lacking water and food.

Italian foreign minister Franco Frattini requested a formal investigation of the incident and instructed his country's ambassador to NATO to raise the issue of rescue of civilian refugees as part of the NATO mission in the war.

NATO officials denied they had received an appeal to save the refugee vessel. A spokeswoman said that Italian authorities had told NATO about the ship while saying they were responding to the distress call themselves. "NATO subsequently confirmed with Italian authorities that they had responded to the incident with three ships as well as with helicopter support," the official said.

A right-wing Italian MP, Roberto Castelli, denounced NATO claims that its fleet did not know the refugee boat was in the maritime war zone. "The idea that NATO, with all its surveillance technology, was not aware of a boat of this size is a story that not even Little Red Riding Hood would believe," he said.

The war was launched by the United States, France and Britain on the pretext of defending civilians from the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, but NATO warplanes have routinely bombed civilians, both in Gaddafi-held territory and even in the areas held by the NATO-backed "rebels."

At the same time, in the Mediterranean, thousands of refugees fleeing the war zone are persecuted by the NATO powers, just as they were before the war.

In another atrocity case, the International News Safety Institute asked UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to investigate the NATO bombing of the headquarters of Libyan state television, in which three people were reported killed and 15 injured. The INSI asked the UN leader to determine whether the attack was a breach of a 2006 Security Council resolution that bans attacks on journalists.

The International Federation of Journalists has also condemned the July 30 bombing raid, which destroyed three satellite transmission dishes.

NATO officials claimed the destruction of the television center fell under the purview of its UN authorization to "protect civilians," the all-purpose justification for every crime committed by the imperialist powers since the war began in March.

A NATO statement said: "Our intervention was necessary as TV was being used as an integral component of the regime apparatus designed to systematically oppress and threaten civilians and to incite attacks against them. Qaddafi's increasing practice of inflammatory broadcasts illustrates his regime's policy to instill hatred amongst Libyans, to

mobilize its supporters against civilians and to trigger bloodshed.”

But INSI director Rodent Pincer said the bombing of a television broadcast center could not be excused “on the basis that you disagree with the point of view of the news organizations.”

“NATO forces in Libya are acting under a Security Council mandate to protect civilians and journalists are civilians,” he said.

Meanwhile, there were rival claims by Libyan opposition forces and the Gaddafi regime about events in Zlitan, a strategically critical city that lies on the path from Misrata, the largest rebel-held city in the west, and Tripoli.

Spokesmen for the Transitional National Council in Benghazi claimed that a NATO airstrike in Zlitan had killed one of Gaddafi’s sons, Khamis, who commands an elite military unit fighting there.

A Libyan government spokesman denied the claim, saying that it was advanced as disinformation and to cover a slaughter of civilians in the air strike. Two small children and their mother were killed early Thursday morning as they slept, according to reports of eyewitnesses interviewed by CNN.

Khamis Gaddafi, the sixth son of the Libyan leader, has been reported dead by Western media outlets at least twice before since the war began. Gaddafi’s seventh son, Saif al-Arab, was killed in April in a NATO air strike on a family home in Tripoli.

There was heavy fighting around Zlitan, about 90 miles east of Tripoli, where British-operated Apache attack helicopters have been deployed to assist rebel forces seeking a breakthrough towards the Libyan capital.

A second offensive operation against the regime was under way in western Libya, as hundreds of Berber fighters moved out of the western Nafusa Mountains to attack towns and villages south of Tripoli, including Tiji, a town of 10,000 150 miles southwest of the capital.

Whatever gains the rebels may have made on the ground in the west could well be outweighed by the infighting at the headquarters of the TNC in Benghazi, which saw the killing July 28 of Abdel-Fattah Younis, the former top Gaddafi aide who defected in February and became the top military leader of the opposition forces.

On Sunday, July 31, there was an hours-long gunfight in Benghazi between rival militia forces which left four dead. TNC officials have provided no explanation of either the killing of Younis or the subsequent internecine warfare.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact