

NATO airstrike kills dozens of civilians east of Tripoli

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The Libyan government charged Tuesday that a NATO airstrike killed 85 civilians near Zlitan, 90 miles east of the capital Tripoli on the Mediterranean coast. Libyan government spokesman Moussa Ibrahim said the bombing occurred late Monday night in Majar, a community about three miles south of Zlitan.

The state news agency JANA reported, “Dozens of innocent and safe children, woman and old people were martyred in the heinous massacre committee by the colonial crusader NATO alliance as a result of its airstrikes on their homes in Majar (in Zlitan) while they were asleep.” JANA said that “20 families” had been killed.

Libyan television footage from a hospital showed what a broadcaster described as the burned bodies of at least three children under the age of nine killed in the attack. There were also video clips of badly wounded women and children being treated.

Libyan government spokesman Mussa Ibrahim told reporters on a guided tour that Majar had been attacked “to allow rebel fighters to enter” the government-held city. He said the 85 villagers killed included 33 children and 32 women. Journalists were shown at least 25 bodies in the morgue, as well as the ruins of several homes hit by the strike.

Zlitan has been the target of an intense aerial bombing campaign by NATO against Libyan government forces. A NATO spokesman confirmed that its jets struck three times overnight in Zlitan. The military alliance claims that a former farm complex in Zlitan has been turned into a “military staging area” for troops loyal to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Colonel Roland Lavoie, NATO spokesman, claimed in a video conference held at NATO’s Naples headquarters that the raids near Zlitan were against “a legitimate target.” He claimed cynically that NATO

“takes extreme precaution not to harm innocent civilians living or working nearby.”

Lavoie added, “We do not have evidence of civilian casualties at this stage, although casualties among military personnel—including mercenaries—are very likely due to the nature of the target.” He said a final “battle assessment” was still forthcoming.

“We cannot confirm reports of civilian casualties, but we would regret any loss of civilian life,” another NATO spokesperson commented, adding, “NATO goes to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties, unlike the Gaddafi regime, which is deliberately targeting civilians.”

Since the imperialist assault began in March, the US, Britain and France have seized on the pretext of protecting civilians from the Gaddafi regime to justify NATO’s actions. However, NATO warplanes have routinely carried out bombing raids against civilians, even in the areas held by the NATO-backed “rebel” forces directed by the Transitional National Council (TNC).

The NATO alliance has also targeted journalists, in contravention of international law. On Monday, the head of the UN cultural agency UNESCO rebuked NATO for its July 30 airstrikes against Libyan television. The strikes hit three ground-based satellite transmission dishes in Tripoli, killing several people and wounding nearly a dozen others.

“I deplore the NATO strike on Al-Jamahiriya and its installations,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova in a statement. “Media outlets should not be targeted in military actions. UN Security County Resolution 1738 (2006) condemns acts of violence against journalists and media personnel in conflict situations,” she said.

Bokova said the airstrikes were “contrary to the

principles of the Geneva Conventions,” which have established the civilian status of journalists in times of war. NATO officials said at the time that it had bombed the television center to silence “terror broadcasts,” claiming the action fell under the mandate of its UN authorization to “protect civilians.”

News of the latest NATO atrocity comes as Gene Cretz, US ambassador to Tripoli, heads out on a tour of African countries this week in an effort to drum up support for its campaign to oust Gaddafi, which has lasted far longer than the NATO powers had expected.

Cretz is visiting Ethiopia, home of the African Union, and other African countries. The inter-governmental body has not supported the demands of the US, France and Britain for Gaddafi to quit power. Individual African leaders have also criticized NATO’s continued airstrikes as going beyond the UN mandate to protect Libyan civilians.

The *Financial Times* quoted a senior Obama administration official who said Cretz’s mission was aimed at defusing African countries’ criticisms of NATO and bringing them “a little closer” to the TNC. “This is an effort to redouble the pressure on the regime,” he said.

The killing late last month of Libyan rebel military commander Gen. Abdel Fatah Younis has still gone unexplained, stoking infighting within the TNC in Benghazi and highlighting what appears more and more to be a military stalemate in Libya.



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