

Libyan humanitarian disaster deepens as NATO, opposition continue offensive

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The humanitarian crisis in Libya is deepening as NATO-backed forces of the National Transitional Council (NTC) continue their offensive to crush forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, with the assistance of NATO bombing and special forces troops.

Yesterday AFP reported artillery fire as NTC prepared to attack Surt, Gaddafi's home city in the center of Libya's Mediterranean coast. Surt was heavily bombed on Sunday, with NATO concentrating most of its 52 airstrikes on Libya that day on the city.

NTC spokesman Abdulrahman Busin said that talks with loyalists in Surt were continuing, after breaking down when Moussa Ibrahim—a top Gaddafi official—demanded that NTC forces disarm before entering the city.

NTC forces were also observing a tenuous, weeklong truce in their offensive against Bani Walid, a city at a strategic crossroads connecting Misrata and Tripoli to the inland areas. NTC fighters said they suspected leading Gaddafi officials might be there. They have cut off water and electricity supplies to the city, and are reportedly using re-establishment of utilities as a bargaining chip in negotiations.

The location of Gaddafi himself, like that of his son Saif al-Islam, is unknown. There were some reports that he might have fled in a large convoy of Libyan military vehicles spotted in the city of Agadez in neighboring Niger, apparently heading for that country's capital, Niamey. Abdoulaye Harouna, the owner of an Agadez newspaper, reported that Tuareg rebel leader Rissa ag Boula, who had found refuge in Gaddafi's Libya after mounting a failed bid for independence in Niger, was at the head of the convoy.

Military sources in France, the former colonial power in Niger, told *Le Monde* that the convoy was part of a plan to transport Gaddafi and Saif al-Islam to political

asylum in Burkina Faso, and that France was arranging negotiations between the NTC and Gaddafi officials. Officials in Niger denied that Gaddafi was in the convoy, however, and Burkina Faso claimed to have no information on the arrival of the convoy on its soil.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland confirmed the departure of the convoy to Niger, including "some dozen or more senior members of the regime," but did not confirm that Gaddafi was in the convoy. Officials at NATO headquarters in Brussels and NATO's Libya war command center in Naples declined to comment. However, given the intense ground surveillance carried out by NATO during its bombing, NATO would be well aware of its location and size.

Conditions in Tripoli—the Libyan capital now tenuously held by NTC forces—are also extremely tense. Water engineers are working to repair the Great Man-Made River project, which brought water to the city's 1.8 million residents as well as to neighboring cities, until it was cut off by NATO bombings in late July and the rebel offensive in August. Engineers said they hoped their repairs had restored water to 70 percent of Tripoli's residents.

Of particular concern are reports of mass racist reprisals in Libya against black African immigrants, often accused of being mercenaries of Gaddafi fighting against the NTC.

However, the vast majority are menial laborers who came to work in Libya, whose economy is relatively prosperous due to its massive oil reserves. Human Rights Watch (HRW) official Peter Bouckaert, who told the *New York Times* that HRW had visited several jails for African migrants, explained: "It is very clear to us that most of those detained were not soldiers and have never held a gun in their life."

In fact, somewhere between 1 million and 2 million African immigrants found work in Libya. Already in 2000 they were the target of race riots, and they are now at risk of arbitrary detention or worse. These events expose the hypocrisy of pro-imperialist claims that the NATO intervention in Libya aimed to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and promote democracy.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) issued a statement declaring: “The ICRC is concerned about the stigmatization of sub-Saharan Africans and certain Libyan communities in Tripoli and elsewhere in the country.”

Despite the Western media’s broad support for the NTC, its accounts make clear the role of the right-wing NTC “rebel” victory in encouraging the abuse of African migrants. The *New York Times* noted, “With thousands of semi-independent rebel fighters still roaming the streets for any hidden threats, though, controlling the impulse to round up migrants may not be easy.”

Lynchings of African migrants also accompanied the takeover of the eastern city of Benghazi by the NTC this winter.

Press accounts mentioned a group of 1,200 migrant workers, women, and children trapped in the southern desert town of Sabha, long a loyalist stronghold but now threatened by the spread of fighting; another group of 1,000 black Africans who have taken refuge in a military port at Sidi Bilal, west of Tripoli; a group of 240 Sudanese oil workers stranded in the town of Brega; and a group of 700 migrants held by “rebel” authorities in a new prison facility in Tripoli, as part of a prison population of African migrants in that city numbering in the thousands.

A construction worker from Niger, hiding in a rusted ship in the port of Sidi Bilal after being attacked and having his savings and telephone stolen from him, told *Le Figaro*: “It was already not very fun to live in Libya before the war. We were not treated well. Sometimes our wages were not paid, people threw stones at us in the street, or we were arrested by police for no reason. Now that there is the war, however, it is even worse.”

Nigeria has issued a formal protest to the NTC, Britain, and France over reports of the killing of its citizens. Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Olugbenga Ashiru called on the NTC to “check these excesses” after noting reports that “revealed killings,

rape, and extortion of money from these helpless Africans who have taken refuge in camps as well as those in detention and incarceration.”



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