

As Libyan “rebel” offensive stalls, NATO bombs kill hundreds

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NATO bombed cities across Libya over the weekend as fighting continued in Sirte and Bani Walid between troops loyal to Muammar Gaddafi and the NATO-backed forces of the National Transition Council (NTC).

There are mounting reports of casualties due to the NATO bombing. NATO spokesmen said yesterday that on Saturday NATO forces bombed 11 targets in Sirte, 11 in the nearby Al-Jufra oasis, and 3 in the city of Sabha, far to the south.

Moussa Ibrahim, an official of the Gaddafi regime, released a statement yesterday saying that 354 people had been killed and 700 injured when a NATO air strike in Sirte hit the city’s main hotel and a nearby apartment block. He said an additional 89 people were still missing.

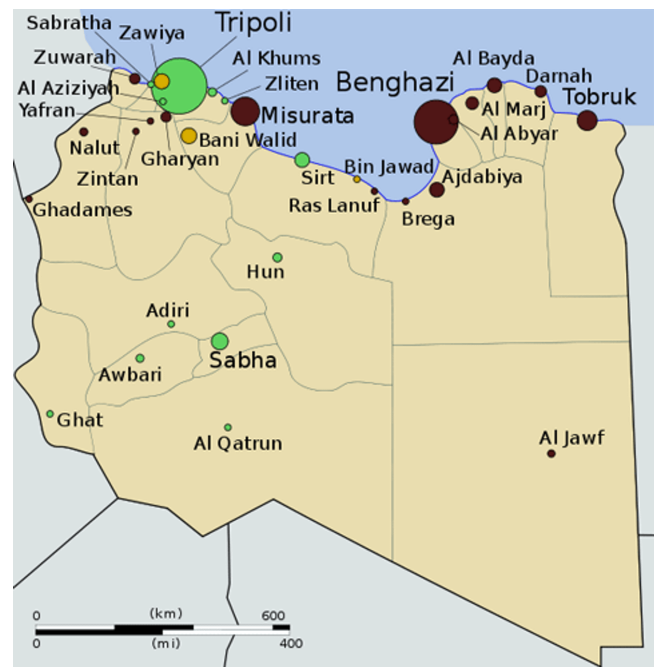
“In the past 17 days,” he added, “more than 2,000 residents of the city of Sirte were killed in NATO air strikes.”

NATO spokesman Colonel Roland Lavoie summarily dismissed reports of Libyan civilian casualties, saying, “Most often, they are revealed to be unfounded or inconclusive.”

The NATO war’s enormous cost in blood is not even disputed by NTC forces. According to NTC estimates released on September 8, the war in Libya has left 30,000 dead and 50,000 wounded. It has been widely reported that NATO’s massive use of air power against Libyan cities, which necessarily entails civilian casualties, has enabled the NTC to defeat loyalist forces despite NTC units’ lack of discipline and military training.

NATO operations against Bani Walid apparently aim to cut off pro-Gaddafi areas in southern Libya from Sirte, Gaddafi’s birthplace, which divides NTC-held areas around Benghazi in northeast Libya and Tripoli to the northwest. Tripoli fell to NTC forces last month, after electricity and

water to the city were cut off and pro-NTC tribes from the Nafusa Mountains attacked the city.



NTC forces launched offensives against Sirte on Thursday and Saturday, claiming to have advanced one mile into the city. However, they were beaten back by rocket and mortar fire, which they said came from atop high rises and apartment complexes in the city of 75,000 inhabitants.

Civilians tried to flee Sirte as NATO bombings and NTC raids turned it into a war zone. Abdul Aziz, a businessman who was leaving the city, told the Associated Press: “There hasn’t been power in Sirte for a long time. Sometimes there is water, sometimes there isn’t. There is food for now but no medicine... It’s very dangerous in Sirte. Yesterday they were fighting near my house. My kids are very scared, that is why I want them to get out.”

An NTC communiqué declared the NTC had lost 24 dead and 54 wounded in the fighting around Sirte. Saleb Abu Shaala, an NTC brigade commander, told *Al Jazeera* that the

situation was “pitiful,” adding, “There is no central command, we are retreating to regroup and re-enter again from three fronts.”

On Sunday, NTC forces also retreated in disorder from Bani Walid after coming under heavy mortar and sniper fire while advancing on the city. Pro-Gaddafi forces reportedly hold strategic high ground in mountains near the city that the NTC has not been able to overrun.

Sabri Salem, a former Libyan air force pilot now acting as an NTC commander, attacked the “lack of organization” and coordination between various NTC units fighting near Bani Walid. He said, “We just showed up and nobody asked us any questions. We just drove into Bani Walid” based on reports that NTC forces were already inside the city in large numbers. However, “there was absolutely nobody. Then we came under very intense fire from Gaddafi forces and retreated.”

NATO warplanes were seen circling over Bani Walid, though NTC forces claimed they did not bomb the city.

There are signs of rising concern and impatience among the NATO powers over the NTC’s poor performance. The *New York Times*, which has vigorously supported the Libyan war from the outset, attacked NTC field commanders for making false announcements of military victories: “Like dogs tearing off to retrieve imaginary sticks thrown by their masters, television crews and photographers have repeatedly rushed to the front lines to cover the fall of the holdouts, only to discover that the attackers were merely on the outskirts, and not even planning to stay there beyond dark.”

The ongoing military operations in Libya further expose the lies used to justify NATO’s intervention to back the NTC against the Gaddafi regime. Launched in March under the guise of protecting anti-Gaddafi protesters in Benghazi—with claims that the very idea of civilian deaths was intolerable—the intervention has become a naked war of conquest involving mass killings. Working with right-wing NTC forces, NATO is trying to install a pliant regime in Tripoli that will hand over Libya’s massive oil reserves to Western corporations.

On Friday, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to ease sanctions on Libya, allowing the NTC to import weapons, and unfreezing Libyan oil companies’ funds so they can resume operations.

The various factions of the NTC are now battling over how

to divide the financial and political spoils of their Western-backed military campaign. They are split geographically (between figures based in Benghazi and in Tripoli) as well as politically. The NTC includes tribal forces, various Islamist groups including members of the Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and ex-Gaddafi regime officials.

Yesterday, NTC leader Mahmud Jibril cancelled the planned announcement of a cabinet of ministers for a Libyan government, stating, “The announcement of a new transitional government has been postponed indefinitely in order to finalize consultations.” He added that more women and youth would be asked to fill posts as deputy ministers and directors-general of Libyan ministries.

The defense portfolio is expected to go to Osama al-Juwili, and oil to Abdel Rahman bin Yezza. This marks a shift from a previous announcement that Ali Tarhuni, a US-educated economist, would chair the oil ministry. Instead, he is expected to receive the post of vice president in charge of economic affairs.

This followed a bitter denunciation of the NTC leadership last Tuesday by one of its members, Islamist leader Ismail al-Salabi—an ally of ex-LIFG member and Tripoli military overlord Abdel Hakim Belhadj. He said that Jibril’s faction of the NTC was leading Libya towards “a new era of tyranny and dictatorship” that could be “worse than Gaddafi.”

He attacked them as “extreme secularists” who are trying to enrich themselves via the “deal of a lifetime.” A former Gaddafi regime official who had backed the privatization of Libyan state assets, Jibril arrived in Tripoli only on Friday, after running the NTC from its main base in Benghazi.



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