

Mass killing and humanitarian disaster in NATO siege of Sirte

Bill Van Auken
29 September 2011

Refugees from the Libyan coastal city of Sirte report that thousands have died as a result of relentless NATO bombardment and shelling by the the Western-backed “rebels.”

The two-week-old NATO siege of Sirte has left the city without adequate food, drinkable water, medicine and other basic necessities of life, creating hellish condition for its population of 100,000.

While the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC) has repeatedly issued announcements that the so-called rebels had advanced toward the city center under NATO air cover, they have again and again been forced to retreat under heavy fire from forces loyal to Col. Muammar Gaddafi, as well as what have been described as citizen volunteers.

In their frustration, the anti-Gaddafi militias have pounded the coastal city with artillery and mortar rounds, tank shells and Grad rockets, wreaking horrific destruction.

Thousands of refugees have tried to flee the city, forced to pass through checkpoints set up by the NATO-backed forces, where many have been taken prisoner, accused of being Gaddafi supporters.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported from one of these checkpoints, describing lines of cars and trucks, packed with civilians and piled with mattresses and other belongings:

“As refugees gathered, the Misrata fighters checked their names against lists of suspected Gaddafi loyalists. Some men were arrested while others were told to wait on the side of the road with their families.

“‘We’re going to punish even those that supported Moammar with words,’ said a bearded fighter to a man who protested his detention. ‘We are the knights that liberated Libya.’ ”

Reports from inside the city indicate a deepening humanitarian catastrophe. The aid group Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF—Doctors Without Borders) reported Wednesday that it had been in touch with doctors at the main hospital in Sirte, who were facing an increasingly impossible situation.

“If the situation continues for a few more days or weeks, it will be catastrophic. Already the doctors in the hospital can’t do their work properly, and if it persists, the situation will become dramatic,” Dr. Mego Terzian, head of emergency

programs for MSF-France, told the Reuters news agency.

“They said the hospital was overwhelmed with wounded,” said Terzian. “There are other kinds of emergencies—pediatric, gynecological and patients with chronic diseases who are not receiving treatment.

“They told us of huge difficulties, a lack of electricity, water and basic medicines to run the emergency room, including anesthetics, antibiotics, analgesics, and blood bags,” he told Reuters.

The MSF representative said that the doctors in Sirte had contacted the group asking for emergency medical supplies, but that the National Transitional Council had “forbidden” MSF volunteers from crossing through its siege lines to aid the population.

Terzian said that the group was investigating whether it could bring in supplies by sea, but that it was not optimistic. NATO warships are maintaining a blockade of Libya’s Mediterranean coast, which is an integral part of the barbaric siege of Sirte.

Another doctor interviewed by the Associated Press said that many of the wounded being brought into the city’s central Ibn Sina Hospital were civilians who appeared to have been hit by rebel shells. The doctor, Eman Mohammed, reported that the hospital had no oxygen in the operating rooms and few staff members to treat patients.

Lack of food, water, electricity and other basic necessities is also taking its toll on the general population, particularly the city’s children. Reporting from a clinic in the town of Harawa, just a few miles outside of Sirte, AFP said that large numbers of families were bringing in young children suffering from severe diarrhea and vomiting.

“Most patients coming to me are children,” Valentina Rybakova, a Ukrainian doctor who has worked in Libya for eight years, told AFP. “I saw 120 patients since morning and 70 percent of them were children. This is a big humanitarian crisis. We are trying to get help from everybody, but the main problem is that these people have no access to clean drinking water.” She said that her clinic, too, was suffering from a shortage of medicines, as well as critical lack of nursing staff.

“The situation in the city is very critical,” Muftah Mohammed, a fish trader who was leaving Sirte, told AFP. “Children are in a particularly bad condition. There is no milk

for them. We have all been surviving on just macaroni for several days.”

“There is no food, there is no medicine, and every night, for five or six hours, NATO bombs all sorts of buildings,” Sami Abderraman, 64, told the Spanish daily *El Pais* as he sought to leave Sirte. “Hundreds of women and children have died like animals.” Abderraman estimated that as many as 3,000 people have been killed in the siege.

Another refugee, who asked not to be named, told *El Pais* that “The people who remain are going to fight to the death.”

Riab Safran, 28, spoke to the *Times* of London as his car was being searched at a rebel roadblock outside of Sirte. “It was worse than awful,” he said. “They hit all kinds of buildings—schools, hospitals.” He said that he and his family had slept on the beach to avoid the NATO bombs and rebel shells, which had destroyed his own house on Saturday.

Ali Omar, who fled the city with 27 members of his extended family, recounted the carnage being carried out by the NATO-backed rebels advancing on Sirte from Benghazi in the east.

“The easterners are exterminating everything in front of them,” said the 42-year-old Omar. He and his family, he said, had been pinned down inside their home by heavy gunfire for seven hours on Sunday.

A number of the refugees have told reporters that those remaining in the city feared violence at the hands of the “rebels” after reports of many of those fleeing being detained and of women being abducted from cars leaving the city.

Among the most fearful are refugees who fled Tawergha, a town about 25 miles south of Misrata whose population is composed predominantly of black Libyans. Anti-Gaddafi militias charged that the residents of Tawergha had participated in the siege of Misrata by government troops and have retaliated with wholesale ethnic cleansing. Houses and stores in the town have been burned and daubed with racist graffiti. The new authorities in Misrata have announced plans to bulldoze the entire town so that none of Tawergha’s residents can ever return.

It is estimated that as many as 5,000 refugees from Tawergha sought safety in Sirte and now fear that they will be slaughtered by the militia forces attacking the city from Misrata to the west. Tawergha refugees who have managed to flee the fighting for Tripoli have found no refuge there either. Misrata militias manning checkpoints in the capital have detained them and thrown them into prison camps, accusing them of being “mercenaries.”

The inability of the Western-backed “rebels” to overrun either Sirte or Bani Walid, another city held by Gaddafi forces to the west, has deepened the crisis of the NTC, which has repeatedly failed to carry through announced plans to form an interim government and has seen its authority come under fire from Islamist militia elements.

This crisis has prompted calls from the NTC for NATO to intensify its bombing of Sirte and Bani Walid.

The demands led to a heated denial by NATO that it was not doing enough to support the sieges of the two cities. “NATO has not reduced its activity in Libya,” said the alliance’s spokesman, Col. Roland Lavoie, who pointed out that NATO warplanes had conducted 100 sorties on Tuesday, including 35 “strike sorties.”

Since launching the war on Libya last March, NATO has conducted 24,140 sorties, including 9,010 strike sorties, leaving much of the country in ruins and thousands killed and wounded.

Col. Lavoie added: “The number of strikes depends on the danger against the civilian population, in conformity of our mandate. We do not aim to bring support to NTC forces on the ground, this is why there is no operational coordination with NTC forces.”

This is, of course, a propaganda lie, which hardly conceals the fact that British, French, US and Qatari special operations troops, intelligence operatives and mercenary military contractors have organized, trained and armed the “rebel” armies, whose every advance has been made possible by NATO bombardments.

The so-called mandate claimed by NATO is the resolution pushed through the United Nations Security Council last March authorizing a no-fly zone and “all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack.”

At the time, the US and its NATO allies claimed that intervention was required to halt a supposedly imminent massacre of civilians in the eastern city of Benghazi. Since then, the NATO bombings and the civil war fomented by the Western powers have claimed far more lives than were ever threatened by the Gaddafi regime.

Now this resolution is being invoked to justify NATO and the militias it supports carrying out in Sirte precisely the kind of murderous siege against a civilian population that the US and the European imperialist powers pretended to be preventing.

The killing and destruction that continue more than six months after NATO began its bombardments and more than a month after it proclaimed the fall of the Gaddafi regime serve to underscore the predatory character of this war, which has been carried out based not on “humanitarian” concerns, but rather on imperialist interests.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact