

NATO and anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya step up bombardment of Sirte

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Anti-Gaddafi militias aligned with the National Transitional Council (NTC) have claimed control over most of Sirte, a coastal Libyan city between Tripoli and Benghazi, after they launched an offensive last Friday that was coordinated with NATO forces.

The militias reportedly now occupy Sirte's university, main hospital, the Ouagadougou Convention Centre and other key points. A significant part of the city, about 30 percent according to *Al Jazeera*, remains under the control of at least several hundred pro-Gaddafi fighters. NTC militia commanders have said they anticipate at least several days of street fighting in civilian areas before they claim control over the city, where between 75,000 and 100,000 people used to live.

War crimes and atrocities have already been carried out in Sirte by NATO and its proxies. The population has been subjected to a protracted siege that was designed to trigger a humanitarian crisis. NTC fighters cut off electricity and water supplies and prevented food and medicines from entering the city. NATO planes and helicopters subjected the area to continual bombardment, with numerous reports emerging from fleeing residents of homes and civilian infrastructure being destroyed. Anti-Gaddafi militias similarly fired rocket and mortar barrages into Sirte in an indiscriminate manner.

The crisis in Sirte underscores the grotesque nature of the claims by the NATO powers and their political cheerleaders that the war on Libya was a "humanitarian" intervention. From the beginning, the Obama administration and its allies in London and Paris disregarded basic precepts of international law as they orchestrated a colonial-style, regime-change campaign aimed at bolstering their economic and geostrategic interests in Libya and across North Africa.

Reports are emerging from Sirte of the terrible impact on civilians. Much of the fighting over the weekend took place

in the "700" suburban housing complex in western Sirte. The *Observer* reported that the area was now "a ghost town, the streets littered with empty shell casings and smashed cars ... deserted villas showed signs of the heavy fighting, with holes made by shells and RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] in the walls of many houses."

The *New York Times* reported that buildings that had been used by pro-Gaddafi snipers were "almost all punctured by bullets or heavier weapons, and some were flattened entirely, possibly by NATO bombs."

Another report in the *Guardian* described the area surrounding the five-hectare Ouagadougou Convention complex, which Gaddafi used for various diplomatic summits and meetings: "The road leading to the complex offers a brutal testimony of the nature of this siege: row after row of gutted and shattered homes, empty of their occupants, smashed by tanks, rockets and artillery."

Numerous civilians have told of the terrible impact of this indiscriminate bombardment. One resident, Hassan Massoud fled Sirte with his family on Saturday after his neighbour's house was destroyed. "It was single-storey," he told Reuters. "It collapsed on them. It killed a man and a girl."

Nasser Hamid, managed to escape Sirte with his wife, three children and niece on Sunday morning. "Our flat was destroyed by machinegun fire," he told AFP. "We stayed in the stairwell. The children were upset because their toys were destroyed."

The brutal nature of the fighting clearly shocked some of the foreign journalists in Sirte. The British *Telegraph* observed: "The constant barrage seemed at odds with the NTC's vow to minimise civilian casualties."

The impact of the weeks-long siege of Sirte was portrayed in an AFP story filed yesterday from the city's main hospital. Fleeing doctors and medical staff had previously

reported a rising death toll there due to an absence of basic medicines, water and oxygen. On October 1, NTC fighters fired rockets and gunfire into the hospital in a criminal attack, apparently aimed at preventing Red Cross officials from delivering medical supplies and body bags.

Now, having captured the hospital, AFP reported: “Triumphant fighters bearing Kalashnikovs marched up and down shouting ‘Allahu akbar’ as dazed and frightened patients in Sirte’s main hospital lay crammed into a ground floor corridor.”

Only two patients remained in the hospital’s intensive care unit on the upper floor, which had to be evacuated because of NTC attacks. AFP reported: “He [Dr. Nabil Lamine] picked his way through shattered glass and turned right into the intensive care unit, where two semi-naked men lay amid the stench of excrement in a room strewn with rubbish and broken medical equipment. One needed brain surgery and the other had to have a leg amputated, Dr. Lamine said as artillery fire rocked the building from the fighting nearby as NTC forces tried to push Gadhafi loyalists back toward the city centre... On the ground floor most of the patients in the corridor were frightened-looking young men, some with horrific burns to their faces. ‘Say *Libya Hurra* [Free Libya],’ one young fighter ordered a patient, who meekly obeyed.”

The NTC militias are determined to carry out a ruthless collective punishment on the population of Sirte. The city was promoted by Gaddafi as a kind of alternative capital to Tripoli and was always closely identified with his regime, being Gaddafi’s home town and a centre of his tribe, the Gaddafifahs.

The militiamen now entering the city are largely drawn from Misrata, where much of the heaviest fighting occurred during the civil war. They have bombarded Sirte after earlier wreaking vengeance on Tawargha. That town of 10,000 people has been looted and razed, with the entire population driven out and told to never return. There was clearly a racist element to this attack, with much of Tawargha’s population consisting of dark skinned Libyans and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Many fled to Sirte and are now again at risk of being dubbed “mercenaries” and detained, tortured and killed by NTC forces.

Several anti-Gaddafi fighters have openly spoken about their intention to destroy Sirte as they did Tawargha. One gunman told Reuters on Sunday: “By the time we enter Sirte, there will be no Sirte.”

The NTC political leadership, which remains based in Benghazi, is urging that the remaining anti-Gaddafi fighters be eliminated as quickly as possible. The self-appointed interim administration has declared it will wait until Sirte is captured before declaring Libya “liberated.” The TNC’s inability to secure control in the coastal city, seven weeks after Gaddafi’s forces were defeated in Tripoli, has proven something of an embarrassment, undermining its posturing as a sovereign national government.

Oil is a key factor in the military calculations, as it has been from the very beginning of the NATO intervention. In an article titled “Foreign firms quietly return to Libya’s oil rich east” and published Saturday, Reuters explained that international oil firms are looking to quickly resume production in Libya’s eastern fields.

Germany’s Wintershall, the US Occidental Petroleum Corp, and Canada’s Suncor Energy are all deploying personnel to the area. But the situation in Sirte is hampering efforts. In eastern Libya, Reuters explained, “fears of an attack loom large and many Libyans are reluctant to leave the safety of their hometowns for remote sites southeast of Sirte, where fighting continues, and few foreign workers have returned.”

Nuri Berruien, chairman of the state-run National Oil Corp, told the Associated Press that the country could return to pre-war output of 1.6 million barrels per day in just over a year. “The market is thirsty for the Libyan crude,” he noted.



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