

Sirte's fall to usher in mass repression by Libya's National Transitional Council

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The Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) has stated that the fight for control of Sirte is reaching “endgame,” with its forces having seized 80 percent of the city.

Yesterday, Libyan government forces were once again pushing tanks deep into Sirte in an attempt to crush the resistance of forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi. The NTC has made taking control of Sirte the condition for proclaiming final victory in the war.

Both Washington and the European powers are anxious for such an announcement, which they anticipate will open Libyan oil reserves for exploitation by US, French and British corporations.

The price of this opportunity for imperialist enrichment will be paid in more bloodshed.

Abdul Hadi Doghman, commander of the Dat al-Ramal brigade, said of the pro-Gaddafi forces, “We are going to engage them with tanks and heavy artillery first. After that we will send in the pick-up trucks with anti-aircraft guns, then the infantry.”

Their opponents have no choice but to fight to the finish, given that they will likely be either imprisoned and tortured, or executed, if they surrender.

The battle for Sirte has already witnessed terrible brutality and war crimes by the NTC forces and NATO, whose offensive has virtually destroyed and largely depopulated the coastal city that was once home to between 75,000 and 100,000 people.

As late as October 12, hundreds of civilians, mainly women and children, were reported evacuating the devastated city.

Khadija Patel wrote on *AllAfrica.com* October 12 that “civilians have borne the brunt of this protracted battle,” with thousands having “already fled the city during lulls in the fighting between Gaddafi loyalists and opposition forces, describing conditions in the city as a ‘disaster.’ Many civilians are still trapped in the city and fear the rebels will seek to retaliate against them once the city has been won.”

People fleeing Sirte last Sunday “said that they had to leave because they were ‘caught between NATO bombings and shelling by rebels,’ with NATO ‘bombing at random and often hitting civilian buildings.’”

Those who remain trapped are deprived of electricity, food, water supplies and sewage treatment. They fear a similar fate to

that of the residents of Tawargha, which was looted and razed to the ground. At greatest risk are dark-skinned Libyans, who have been routinely targeted by NTC forces for brutal and clearly racist reprisals.

On Wednesday, Amnesty International issued a devastating report on the appalling treatment meted out to captured Gaddafi soldiers, loyalists and those dark-skinned Libyans and foreign workers falsely accused of being mercenaries.

Amnesty noted that since late August, armed militia have arrested and detained around 2,500 people in Tripoli and al-Zawiya, of which its reporters interviewed around 300. No trials have been held since February and Amnesty described the arrests as “better described as abductions.”

Its report stated: “The individuals have then been taken away either in unmarked pick-up trucks with anti-aircraft machine-guns mounted on them or in regular vehicles. In some cases, captives have been thrown into car boots. Usually, no reason has been provided for their ‘arrest’ and no indication given to their relatives as to their destination.”

Amnesty stated that there was clear evidence of torture, either in order to extract confessions or as a punishment—usually beatings with wooden sticks, rifle butts, rubber hoses, whips, fists or boots accompanied by death threats. “In some cases,” it added, “detainees said they were shot in the legs after capture.”

Children were held with adults, men and women. One 17-year-old boy from Chad, falsely accused of rape and being a mercenary, was taken from his home in August by armed men, who punched him and beat him with sticks, belts, rifles and rubber cables.

Dozens of black-skinned Tawarghans were taken from their homes, as well as from checkpoints and even from hospitals. Between a third and a half of detainees were Sub-Saharan African nationals, many migrant workers from Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan.

Most had been seized from their homes and none were captured in battle. None wore uniforms or had weapons.

One group of 14 Nigerian men and 12 Nigerian women were seized on September 1 as they were trying to flee to Tunisia. Women and men were “beaten in the courtyard with sticks all over our bodies,” one of the women said.

They and others interviewed recount how they were routinely

referred to as “slaves.”

Another group of 26 said they were beaten with rifle butts, sticks and electric wires. They had marks all over their bodies consistent with these claims. Amnesty reported, “Two detainees said cigarettes had been extinguished on their flesh.”

One detainee explained, “they placed a burning candle on my head until it burnt my hair. This was done to stop me sleeping.” Amnesty International observed scars and bluish bruises all over his body, particularly on his back.

In al-Judaïda, Tripoli’s largest prison, one inmate told a BBC reporter, “Only 1 percent of the people in here are guilty... The people who are really guilty have all fled. We’ve all been rounded up because they think we supported Gaddafi. But everyone had to support Gaddafi.”

One detainee “was picked up after a picture of Col. Gaddafi was found under his car seat. Another said he had simply been caught up in a private vendetta. ‘They have done no investigation, nothing,’ he said, with tears rolling down his face.”

The head of the UN human rights office’s rule of law section, Mona Rishmawi, was obliged to warn that perceived Gaddafi loyalists face persecution when fighting in Sirte and Bani Walid ends. There is “is a lot of room for abuse” of the estimated 7,000 people detained throughout Libya, she said.

A blogger for Amnesty commented: “I get the impression that media attention is already fading fast with Libya. This is a pity and a worry. My understanding of history is that after a revolution you often get horrible reprisal attacks and score-settling. In Libya this is already happening. The uncomfortable truth is that NTC forces—or at least armed groups operating as anti-Gaddafi fighters—have been killing, abducting, and torturing people they identify as Gaddafi’s men.”

Journalist Arthur Chatora noted in *Africa Confidential*: “The mainstream media’s conspicuous silence about the racially motivated human rights abuses perpetrated against black Libyans and immigrants by the NATO-backed National Transitional Council (NTC) forces in Libya is disturbing. Similarly, the high civilian casualties of the current intense fighting in the city of Sirte seems, to a large extent, to be underplayed... Is it because the presence of widespread evidence of racially motivated human rights abuses committed by the NTC forces raises moral and ethical questions that challenge the validity of the notion of a ‘humanitarian war?’”

None of this is of any genuine concern to the Western powers. British Foreign Secretary William Hague politely asked the NTC to investigate Amnesty’s claims, but only as an afterthought as he urged the formation of an interim government immediately after the fall of Sirte.

The eyes of London, Paris and Washington are firmly fixed on the prospect of the full resumption of oil and gas exploitation.

On Thursday, the Italian oil giant Eni reopened the Greenstream natural gas pipeline connecting Libya and Italy for

the first time in eight months, with an initial test run of three million cubic meters a day. Before the war, Greenstream transported nine billion cubic meters worth of gas a year to Italy—about 12 percent of Italy’s annual needs. Eni has also reported reaching full production at the Abu-Attifel oil field, with 70,000 barrels a day.

On Monday, Nuri Berruïen, chairman of Libya’s National Oil Company, stated that crude oil output has reached 390,000 barrels a day, nearly a quarter of Libya’s pre-war level of 1.6 million barrels a day. Estimates are now that Libya could achieve one million barrels a day by the end of the year, despite pumping oil from only a handful of oil fields in the east that remained under “rebel” NTC control.

The offshore Mediterranean field of Al Jurf, operated by Total of France, is producing oil, as are facilities run by Occidental and Suncor. Germany’s Wintershall, part of BASF, is reportedly preparing to restart its fields in the east that produced around 100,000 barrels per day before the war.

Libya imported \$1.6 billion worth of fuel during the six months of conflict and is yet to repay \$890 million. Interim Oil and Finance Minister Ali Tarhouni pledged, “We will give preference to countries and friends that helped us.”

Yesterday, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen boasted that the imperialist war in Libya was a “positive story” of European and US cooperation. Keen to stress the commitment of NATO’s European members to the war and to deny that significant rifts had opened up within NATO, he boasted of NATO’s 26,000 sorties, including 9,500 strike missions.

His statement should properly be viewed as evidence of a collective war crime that has yet to run its course.



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