

# The slaughter in Sirte

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NATO countries led by the US, Britain, and France are committing terrible war crimes in the Libyan city of Sirte. In their frenzied drive to crush all remaining resistance in the North African state, NATO and its proxy militia forces aligned with the National Transitional Council are unleashing indiscriminate military force, killing civilians and destroying buildings and infrastructure throughout the urban centre.

Numerous civilian refugees who have managed to escape the siege have reported seeing schools, hospitals, homes, and other civilian buildings destroyed by NATO bombs. Air raids are now taking place around the clock. Anti-Gaddafi militiamen are firing rockets, mortar rounds and tank shells, without even pretending that they are aiming at any particular targets within the city of 100,000 people. Sirte is suffering from severe shortages of food, water and medicine supplies, further fuelling the humanitarian crisis. Children, the elderly and other vulnerable people are especially affected.

The violence underscores the predatory economic and geostrategic calculations behind the regime-change campaign spearheaded by US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron. Washington and its European allies aim to seize control of Libya's lucrative oil reserves, at the same time reasserting their dominance in North Africa and countering the challenge posed to their interests by the revolutionary uprisings in neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia.

The slaughter in Sirte further exposes the "humanitarian" pretext for the war. Last March the imperialist governments and their mouthpieces in the media claimed, without evidence, that Gaddafi's forces were on the verge of committing a massacre in

Benghazi. Now in Sirte, NATO is perpetrating an actual bloodbath on the city's population in an attempt to overcome the resistance in one of the last pro-Gaddafi strongholds.

Unsurprisingly, the various media pundits and political figures in the US and Europe who backed the war on the basis of "protecting civilians"—including various so-called "lefts" such as Professor Juan Cole and the *Nation* magazine—are now uniformly silent amid the unfolding slaughter.

According to estimates previously released by the National Transitional Council (NTC), by early September 30,000 people had been killed and 50,000 wounded in the war. The toll continues to escalate. According to NATO's publicly released figures, their bombers recorded 121 separate "key hits" in Sirte in the last two weeks of September alone. These air strikes are being conducted on the basis of limited or no intelligence and therefore can only be described as indiscriminate and in blatant contravention of international law.

Tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped in Sirte, though the exact number remains unclear. According to the Red Cross, about 18,000 have left the city. The local population, however, has been swelled by a recent influx of refugees from surrounding areas. This includes a significant number of dark-skinned Libyan families from Tawargha, a town that has been devastated and depopulated by the NTC militias that conducted a murderous racist pogrom there in August and early September.

The people of Sirte are being subjected to a brutal collective punishment for their bitter and determined opposition to the NTC and the NATO intervention. The

city is also symbolically identified with the deposed regime. It is Gaddafi's birthplace and childhood home, and his former legislative body, the General Peoples Congress, convened in Sirte.

For the US, British, and French governments, the destruction serves as a warning to the entire Libyan population—any resistance to the post-Gaddafi order that is to be established under NATO auspices will confront violent repression.

There is a definite parallel between the situation in Sirte and the brutal US offensive in the Iraqi city of Fallujah during November-December 2004. About 10,000 US troops and marines levelled the city of 250,000 people, indiscriminately bombing homes, factories and mosques. The operation was intended to crush the Sunni insurgency against the illegal occupation by terrorising the entire Iraqi people. As is now the case in Sirte, the fighting in Fallujah was less a war or battle than it was an outright massacre, with a vastly outnumbered and lightly armed group of resistance fighters overcome by the world's most destructive and technologically advanced ground and air forces.

NATO's conduct of the war in Libya during what appears to be its final stages is also undoubtedly intended to send a signal to governments throughout the Middle East and internationally. In March, Sarkozy made this clear in no uncertain terms, declaring: "Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand, that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on each time be the same."

Exactly one hundred years ago, on October 3, 1911, Italian forces began a naval bombardment of Tripoli, as part of their drive to annexe the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzana and Cyrenaica, which constitute present-day Libya. The Italian campaign quickly extended from an assault on the Ottoman military forces to a campaign of indiscriminate reprisal attacks and massacres against the local population who rose up against the colonial forces. The Italo-Turkish war, which ended in October 1912, featured a one-sided utilisation of modern military technology, including the

world's first aerial reconnaissance flights and bombing raids.

Lenin described the war as a "perfected, civilised bloodbath."

None of these words would need to be revised to describe what is now unfolding in Libya. The re-emergence of nakedly colonial-style operations in the twenty-first century is an expression of the deepening crisis of the world capitalist order. The American ruling elite desperately seeks to use its military dominance as a means of offsetting its rapidly eroding economic position. At the same time, the European imperialist powers see an opportunity to regain lost influence in their former colonies, opening up new export markets and securing access to lucrative natural resources.

Even before the fighting has finished, various politicians and accompanying corporate bagmen from the US and Europe have rushed to Tripoli. Everyone is scrambling to secure their cut, above all of the North African state's enormous oil reserves—recently described by the US ambassador there as the Libyan "jewel in the crown."

As in the period prior to 1914, humanity confronts a descent into imperialist barbarism. A struggle against war and militarism requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program to abolish the profit system.

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