

Human rights groups charge NATO with war crimes in Libya

Bill Van Auken
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There is strong evidence that NATO carried out war crimes in its eight-month war for regime-change in Libya, according to a report released Thursday by Middle East human rights groups.

The United Nations resolution authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect civilians was utilized as the justification for military actions against civilian targets in which many Libyans were killed and wounded, according to the groups’ investigation.

The report is based upon a fact-finding mission to Libya conducted by the Arab Organization for Human Rights, together with the Palestinian Center for Human Rights and the International Legal Assistance Consortium. The investigators conducted extensive interviews with victims of war crimes as well as witnesses and Libyan officials. The mission carried out on-site field investigations in and around Tripoli, Zawiya, Sibrata, Khoms, Zliten, Misrata, Tawergha and Sirte.

While the investigation concluded that the government of Col. Muammar Gaddafi used excessive force against protesters, the report also states: “There does not appear to have been a clear demarcation between peaceful protests and armed opposition, and the Mission received credible information indicating that protestors took up arms in the early stages of the revolution.”

In terms of NATO’s role, the report cites evidence that in addition to NATO air strikes, the US-led alliance deployed troops on the ground, which coordinated the offensive of the so-called “rebels” with the bombing campaign.

“NATO participated in what could be classified as offensive actions undertaken by the opposition forces, including, for example, attacks on towns and cities held by Gaddafi forces,” the report states. “Equally, the

choice of certain targets, such as a regional food warehouse, raises prima facie questions regarding the role of such attacks with respect to the protection of civilians.”

Among civilian sites visited by the mission that had been struck by NATO bombs and missiles were schools and colleges, a Zliten regional food warehouse, the Office of the Administrative Controller in Tripoli, and private homes.

The mission found its strongest evidence of war crimes in the coastal city of Sirte, a center of support for Gaddafi, which was the last major area to fall to the NATO-backed forces.

It cites a September 15, 2011 incident in which NATO warplanes struck two jeeps guarding a coastal road, killing or wounding 10 pro-Gaddafi fighters. When residents of the area came out of their homes to help the wounded and retrieve the bodies of the dead, the NATO warplanes struck again, firing a third missile into the crowd. Approximately 50 civilians were killed in the attack.

The report also detailed war crimes by the NATO-backed “rebels.” In addition to summary executions of alleged pro-Gaddafi fighters, witnesses provided reports of “indiscriminate and retaliatory murders, including the ‘slaughter’ (i.e., throat slitting) of former combatants.”

The mission reported on visits to detention centers holding individuals charged in many cases with nothing more than having supported the Gaddafi regime. At one of them, in Zawiya, visibly “panicked” and “desperate” detainees “recounted receiving frequent beatings by guards, and showed bruises and other marks consistent with prolonged and recent abuse. These bruises and marks typically appeared on the torso and upper thigh area of the detainees, and consequently were hidden

from casual observation by clothing. Beatings were reportedly carried out using fists and electric and plastic cables. Detainees also reported 2 recent deaths in custody.”

The report focuses, in particular, on the treatment of black African immigrant workers and black Libyans, who have been indiscriminately rounded up and charged as “mercenaries.” People “with dark skin are being detained as presumed mercenaries. In such instances, there appears to be a presumption of guilt. The alleged mercenaries interviewed by the Mission in detention claimed to have been migrant workers, some of whom had been resident in Libya for over five years prior to the revolution,” the report states.

Emblematic of this racially fueled repression is the fate of Tawergha, a town which formerly had a population of about 30,000. Approximately 38 miles east of Misrata, Tawergha was a former slave-trading post settled by freed slaves, and consequently the majority of its inhabitants were black.

Branded as Gaddafi loyalists, the entire population of Tawergha was driven out through a terror campaign by Misrata-based “rebels,” leaving behind a ghost town. The mission’s investigators found damaged homes littered with personal belongings of residents who apparently “left in extreme haste,” and reported that while they were there in November, arsonists were burning down many of the abandoned residences.

The report quotes a senior Libyan military commander who “confirmed that a number of other ‘loyalist’ villages throughout Libya had met a similar fate.”

“We have reason to think that there were some war crimes perpetrated” by NATO, Raji Sourani, the head of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights told the British Independent newspaper. The mission’s report noted that the effort to determine the scale of these crimes was hindered by the “apparent desire” among the anti-Gaddafi elements who have taken control “to protect NATO, or avoid any direct or indirect criticism.”

The report concludes that the evidence of war crimes in the military intervention for regime-change in Libya necessitates “effective investigation, including, where appropriate, the prosecution of those responsible.”

In November of last year, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Luis Moreno

Ocampo, stated that “there are allegations of crimes committed by NATO forces (and) these allegations will be examined impartially and independently.”

While the ICC last week granted Libya’s National Transitional Council a two-week extension on its deadline to provide the international court with a report on the conditions under which the murdered Libyan leader’s son, Saif al-Islam, is being held and whether he will be turned over to the international court, Moreno-Campo has given no further indication that the ICC is pursuing charges related to NATO’s war crimes or the lynching of Gaddafi.



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