

American military has denied reports that US forces shot and wounded civilians

By [Global Research](#)

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The American military has denied reports that US forces shot and wounded civilians during a rescue operation near Benghazi to pick up two crew members after their warplane crashed.

Britain's Channel 4 News reported that at least six villagers were injured when US Marines came in with "all guns blazing" to extract the pilots. Earlier today *The Telegraph* website also reported that six locals "were believed to have been shot by a US helicopter during his rescue".

United States Africa Command has confirmed a US F-15E Strike Eagle fighter jet crashed in Libya and the two crew members were rescued.

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But a US spokesman "100%" denied any civilians were injured by US weapons fire in the rescue operation.

Reporter Lindsey Hilsum, at the scene of the crash, said the US helicopter came in and opened fire on Monday night, local time, as villagers were handing over one of the downed pilots to local rebel forces.

A man described as a military policeman, Omar Sayd, told the reporter: "We are disturbed

about the shooting because if they had given us a chance we would have handed over both pilots.”

In Benghazi, Hilsum interviewed one of the injured villagers, who was in a hospital bed. Local people had been giving a “party” for the crew when they were fired on.

Their F-15E Strike Eagle jet was on a mission on Monday night when it crashed outside Benghazi due to mechanical failure, not hostile fire, US spokesman Vince Crawley said.

Channel 4 news said that the pilot and a weapons officer were aboard the fighter jet. Both ejected safely, but suffered minor injuries.

The pilot was rescued by the US helicopter soon after crash landing and opposition rebels recovered the weapons officer, taking “took good care of him” before coalition forces picked him up some time later.

Details of the incident remained sketchy. The crash was the first known setback for the international coalition during three days of strikes authorised by the United Nations Security Council.

Early reports said the pilot was rescued by rebels opposed to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Allied forces have expanded their air campaign over Libya to thwart Gaddafi’s fighters and enable rebels to regain control of cities as coalition leaders debate who should be in control of the operation. Norway is keeping its fighters grounded until there is clarity on the chain of command.

Battles flare as doubts persist

Fighting raged between forces loyal to Gaddafi and insurgents in several towns today, despite a UN-mandated no-fly zone aimed at stopping the violence.

As a senior US officer said government forces were still attacking civilians, doubts persisted over the best way to continue the campaign to stop Gaddafi, and where it was leading.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said future actions of the coalition, which began air strikes on Gaddafi military installations on Saturday, local time, depended in part on the embattled Libyan leader.

“The military operations could stop at any moment. All it would take is for the Tripoli regime to adhere precisely and completely with UN Security Council resolutions, and to accept a genuine ceasefire,” he said.

He called on Gaddafi to withdraw troops engaged in military advances and send them “back to their barracks”.

Libyan anti-aircraft fire opened up over the capital after nightfall, amid the sound of far-off explosions, AFP journalists reported.

Residents of Yafran, 130 kilometres south west of Tripoli, said at least nine people had been killed in clashes between the two sides.

Rebels also said they were under intense attack in their enclave of Misrata, east of Tripoli, which has been besieged by Kadhafi's forces for weeks, with four children killed Tuesday.

But rebels said they had managed to fight off loyalists and retake the outskirts of the western town of Zintan.

Fighting 'should recede'

After a third night of strikes on Gaddafi's strongholds and defence structure, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said "significant military fighting that has been going on should recede in the next few days".

Destroying radar and missiles under Gaddafi's control would pave the way for a no-fly zone that could be patrolled by combat aircraft, with the US assuming a supporting role, Gates said in Moscow.

In Misrata, a rebel spokesman reached by telephone said insurgents remained in control despite an onslaught by Gaddafi loyalists who had opened fire with tanks and set snipers on roofs to gun down people in the streets.

A stand-off persisted in eastern Libya, where Gaddafi forces in and around Ajdabiya, south of the insurgents' capital of Benghazi, easily repulsed attempts by the disorganised and ill-armed rebels to advance.

Coalition forces, led by the United States, France and Britain and including some other European states and Arab country Qatar, are acting under UN Security Council resolution 1973 authorising "all necessary means" to protect civilians.

There is coordination but no unified command, and moves to hand over control of the operation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation are dividing the alliance.

NATO 'should play key role'

US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron agreed that NATO should play a key role in the command structure of the Libya mission, the White House said.

"They reviewed the substantial progress that's been made in terms of halting the advance of Gaddafi's forces on Benghazi as well as the establishment of a no-fly zone," spokesman Ben Rhodes said.

NATO ambassadors resumed talks on Tuesday after "very difficult" discussions on Monday which failed to overcome their divisions.

But a diplomat said they had agreed to use the organisation's naval power to enforce an arms embargo on Libya ordered under UN Resolution 1973.

Juppe called for the creation of a special committee of foreign ministers from coalition countries to oversee operations, which he said should meet in the coming days "to show clearly that political oversight is there".

France also has doubts about the impact on Arab countries of NATO taking control - though

the Arab League has backed the no-fly zone - while Germany refused to vote for Resolution 1973.

Belgian and Spanish warplanes began patrolling Libyan skies on Monday, British Typhoon fighters and Canadian jets launched their first missions from Italian bases, and a Greek source said France's aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle should join in from waters off Crete, probably by Wednesday.

Italian pilots said they had helped suppress air defences, despite Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose country has close ties with former colony Libya, saying Italian planes "are not firing and will not fire".

Russia and the United States clashed over Western bombing raids, with the US defence chief saying Moscow had accepted Muammar Gaddafi's "lies" about civilian casualties.

In talks with Gates, Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev voiced dismay over what he called the "indiscriminate use of force".

Gates rejected Moscow's criticism, even as he predicted that the bombing would be scaled back within days.

Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci said the Western-led air strikes were disproportionate, amid US and British efforts to bring more Arab states on board.

A spokesman for British Prime Minister David Cameron said London was talking to Arab nations in a bid to "develop" the coalition.

And the White House said Obama and Turkey's Erdogan agreed to seek a "broad-based international effort, including Arab states".

Oil prices rose after dipping on profit-taking earlier in the day.

Brent North Sea crude for delivery in May rose 49 cents to \$115.45 a barrel in late London trade, while New York's main contract, light sweet crude for April jumped \$1.42 to \$103.75.

And the United States placed sanctions on 14 firms controlled by Libya's National Oil Corp, tightening a financial noose on a key source of funds for the Kadhafi regime.

Meanwhile, it emerged that three western journalists who went missing in eastern Libya last week, including two from Agence France-Presse, were arrested by Gaddafi's forces on Saturday.

AFP chairman Emmanuel Hoog wrote to Gaddafi on Tuesday, asking that he free AFP's Dave Clark and Roberto Schmidt, and Joe Raedle from the Getty agency.

"I have the honour to ask you to restore their liberty, in the name of that same freedom of expression and information that you refer to so often," Hoog wrote.

Reporter Clark and photographer Schmidt, and Raedle, had not been heard from since Friday evening.

Their driver Mohammed Hamed said they ran into a Libyan convoy near Ajdabiya. They turned around, but were caught after a chase by soldiers who shot out their tyres.

Four soldiers ordered the journalists out of their vehicle at gunpoint before putting them into a military vehicle and driving them away.

- with **AFP and Bloomberg**

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