

European Powers Seek to Bomb Libya to Stop Migrants

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The European Union is preparing to bomb targets in Libya to stop migrants from attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in small boats. EU foreign policy coordinator Federica Mogherini is to brief the United Nations Security Council Monday on plans for a "Chapter VII" resolution that would give a UN green light for the use of force.

The plan is the outcome of several weeks of high-level consultations among the 28 EU members, including a foreign ministers' meeting, held in response to a series of incidents of mass drowning of refugees. The worst such tragedy took place April 19, when some 900 drowned when their small boat capsized after colliding with a freighter.

The wreck of that boat, only 25 meters long, was found last Thursday by the Italian Navy at a depth of 375 meters, 190 kilometers northeast of the Libyan coast. Many bodies were seen in or near the wreckage, according to Giovanni Salvi, prosecutor in the Sicilian town of Catania, who is interviewing the relative handful of survivors.

The "bomb the boats" plan is driven, however, not by the number of deaths by drowning, but by the even larger number of refugees who have successfully reached the Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, or have been picked up by merchant ships or the Italian coast guard and navy.

In the most recent tragedy, 40 migrants drowned May 3 when their rubber boat deflated and sank before an oncoming merchant ship could reach them. But another 160 were rescued from the sea. Over that weekend, a total of 4,800 refugees were rescued or reached Lampedusa, while another 2,000 were detained by the Libyan coast guard before their boats left the shore.

EU military intervention would be aimed at stopping the vast majority of refugees now seeking transport across the Mediterranean from even setting foot on board a ship. As for preventing deaths by drowning, it would merely assure that future atrocities would take place along the Libyan shoreline or in the country's coastal waters, rather than further out in the Mediterranean. "Precision" bombing would not be restricted to empty boats, but would strike Libyan fishermen or even boats fully loaded with refugees.

Italy is to have command of the operation, while at least 10 EU countries would contribute military assets, including Britain, France and Spain. NATO would be kept informed of the military actions but would not initially be directly involved.

EU ships would enter Libyan territorial waters, along with aircraft and helicopter gunships, to

identify ships and help “neutralize” them, i.e., blow them to bits. These would reportedly include HMS Bulwark, a helicopter carrier that is the flagship of the British Royal Navy, now deployed at Malta.

In the event that any of the myriad warring factions in Libya fires on EU vessels or aircraft—the country has two governments and multiple militias, many heavily armed by the CIA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or other countries—NATO forces, including those of the United States, could then become involved.

This would be carried out under Article Five of the NATO Charter, the same provision invoked by President Obama during his visit to the Baltic States last year, mandating action by the entire alliance when any individual member or its armed forces come under attack.

Libyan ambassador to the UN Ibrahim Dabbashi told the Associated Press that the EU had not consulted his government, which has been driven from the capital Tripoli and reconvened in the eastern city of Tobruk. Neither the parliament in Tobruk nor its Islamist-dominated rival in Tripoli has agreed to the entry of EU forces into Libyan airspace, coastal waters or territory.

It is not clear whether the UN Security Council will endorse an EU military mission in Libya without some Libyan entity giving its approval. Russia and China, which have veto power, have publicly suggested that they regret their actions of March 2011, when they did not block a Security Council resolution that became the basis of the US-NATO bombing campaign against Libya.

On May 7, Lithuanian Ambassador Raimonda Murmokaite, the current Security Council president, said the Tobruk-based government would back the EU operation, and even request it, but Dabbashi poured cold water over that suggestion. “They never asked anything of us. Why should we send them this letter?” he asked, adding, “We will not accept any boots on the ground.”

The Libyan ambassador suggested that instead of EU military forces, the Security Council should lift its embargo on weapons shipments to Libya and let the Tobruk government build up sufficient military forces to retake Tripoli and the western half of Libya, where most of the refugee boats to Europe originate.

The Tobruk government has named General Khalifa Haftar as commander of the Libyan Army. A former Libyan chief of staff who broke with Gaddafi in the 1980s, Haftar spent a quarter-century on the CIA payroll, living near Langley, Virginia, before returning to Libya during the US-NATO bombing campaign.

EU officials have presented the plan to bomb small fishing boats as an effort to attack so-called people smugglers rather than the migrants themselves. The resolution drafted by Great Britain speaks of the “use of all means to destroy the business model of the traffickers.”

But the real attitude of the EU leaders towards the refugees is demonstrated by the conflicts that have broken out over what to do with the relative handful of refugees who have succeeded in reaching European soil—a few hundred thousand people on a continent of 740 million.

All 28 EU members support the military intervention. However, there are sharp disputes

over rules being drafted by the European Commission to set quotas for each of the countries to share refugees who survive the perilous sea voyage. Germany is the main force behind the quotas, which have been rejected by Britain and many east European countries, where right-wing parties are whipping up anti-immigrant racism.

Germany and Sweden have taken nearly half of all the current wave of refugees, and want to offload many of them onto the other EU member states.

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