

Gates and Clinton Hint at Open-Ended War in Libya

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The US and its European allies stepped up their massive bombing campaign on the side of anti-Gaddafi forces over the weekend, further exposing the pretext of a “limited, humanitarian” intervention for the supposed purpose of protecting Libyan civilians.

The US, Britain and France rained missiles and bombs on Libyan government troops, tanks and artillery around the key battleground city of Ajdabiya, leaving smoking metal and charred corpses in their wake and enabling the rebel forces to retake the town and quickly occupy the oil centers of Brega and Ras Lanuf further to the west.

By Sunday, the anti-Gaddafi forces had captured the town of Bin Jawad. The Obama administration and its counterparts in London and Paris are barely seeking to conceal any longer the fact that they are intervening militarily in a civil war on the side of forces seeking to oust the Libyan dictator, whom they all previously supported.

The BBC’s Ben Brown indicated the total reliance of the rebels on massive air power from their imperialist backers, writing: “But the truth is that they never would have made this breakthrough if it had not been for the devastating coalition air strikes outside Ajdabiya on Thursday and Friday. They destroyed dozens of Col. Gaddafi’s tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery pieces.”

That the US-led “coalition” is closely coordinating its attacks with the rebel forces—something officially denied by its spokesmen—was underscored by the French news agency AFP. It reported that it had been told by the rebels that they would halt their advance overnight at Nufilia, 60 miles east of the Gaddafi stronghold of Sirte, “because they had heard Col. Gaddafi’s troops were deployed about 30 miles down the road towards Sirte. They would wait for coalition air strikes to destroy any heavy weapons, they added.”

The Pentagon said the coalition fired 16 Tomahawk cruise missiles and flew 153 air sorties on Friday. The air missions increased on Saturday to 160. Included was an attack by 20 French fighters supported by US AWACS planes which struck five Libyan fighter jets and two helicopters on the ground at a Libyan base just outside Misurata, a fiercely contested city in the west of Libya.

There were reports of Western missile and air strikes on Sirte, Gaddafi’s birthplace, as well as on Misurata and Tripoli, the capital. Regime officials showed reporters a home in the Tajura section of Tripoli that had been hit by a bomb or missile.

The Reuters news service reported that the bodies of more than a dozen of Gaddafi’s soldiers lay strewn around Ajdabiya’s western entrances, where the fighting was most

intense.

Khalid Omar, an official with the Libyan health ministry, said 114 people had been killed and 445 wounded in coalition bombardment through last Wednesday. The Obama administration refuses to give any estimates of civilian or military casualties from the air war and simply dismisses the claims of the Gaddafi regime as lies.

There is virtually no reporting of reprisals by anti-Gaddafi forces against government sympathizers in the areas captured by the rebels. However, an AFP correspondent reported seeing smoke pouring from the house of an alleged Gaddafi sympathizer in Bin Jawad. Ominously, the report noted that "some rebels feared that government troops might be hiding in people's homes."

Reuters reported that dozens of civilian cars carrying families and loaded with people's belongings were seen fleeing Sirte.

On the Sunday news interview programs, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sought to address some of the glaring contradictions in the official pretexts for the military aggression against a virtually defenseless former colonial country. In the course of their appearances on NBC, CBS, ABC and CNN, they indicated that, official disclaimers notwithstanding, the war is open-ended both in duration and scope.

On ABC's "This Week" program, moderator Jake Tapper asked Gates, "Will the mission be over by the end of the year?" Gates replied, "I don't think anybody knows the answer to that."

When Tapper asked him whether he thought Libya "posed an actual or imminent threat to the United States," Gates said, "No, no, it was not a vital national interest to the United States, but it was an interest..."

This reply underscored the illegal and unconstitutional manner in which the Obama administration launched the war, failing to consult with or obtain authorization from Congress, or even address the American people to explain the action. The War Powers Act provides a loophole for the president to initiate military action before obtaining congressional sanction, but only on the grounds that a vital national interest is involved or the country faces imminent attack.

In attempting to further justify the war, Gates hinted at the real war aims behind the humanitarian fig leaf. "There was another piece of this though that certainly was a consideration," he said. "You've had revolutions on both the East and West of Libya. So you had a potentially significantly destabilizing event taking place in Libya that put at risk potentially the revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt. And that was another consideration we took into account."

When Gates speaks of protecting the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, he is speaking of shoring up the military-dominated regimes that the US helped install when it could no longer maintain in power its long-time stooges Ben Ali and Mubarak. Gates is here alluding somewhat cryptically to the aim of establishing a vassal state in Libya from which the US can mount operations to crush the growing revolutionary movement of the working class in the region.

When asked about the US position on Yemen, whose US-backed president has killed scores of protesters and attacked and arrested hundreds more, Gates made clear that Washington continues to back the dictator, President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He made no attempt to square US support for this leader and Washington's war against Gaddafi, justified with the charge that the Libyan dictator has killed his own people.

Citing the presence of a branch of Al Qaeda in Yemen, Gates said that a "post-Saleh" Yemen "is a real concern." He continued: "And we have had a lot of counterterrorism cooperation from President Saleh and Yemeni security services. So if that government collapses or is replaced by one that is dramatically more weak, then I think we'll face some additional challenges out of Yemen... It's a real problem."

On CBS' "Face the Nation" program, Gates dismissed Libyan government claims of civilian deaths from Western bombing by saying, "The truth of the matter is we have trouble coming up with proof of any civilian casualties that we have been responsible for." He went on to claim, without any substantiation, that there is evidence Col. Gaddafi's troops have been collecting bodies killed in their attacks and moving them to the site of US and European strikes.

On the same program, Clinton refused to rule out the partitioning of Libya under the aegis of the US and the other major powers. The moderator, Bob Schieffer, asked: "What would be an acceptable outcome? You want him out. But would you be satisfied if the country wound up partitioned or something of that nature?"

Clinton merely replied, "I think it's too soon to predict that."

On NBC's "Meet the Press" program, Gates similarly refused to rule out the US supplying the anti-Gaddafi forces with weapons. Gates was asked by the moderator, David Gregory, "Would the US supply arms to the rebels?"

"No decision has been made about that at this point," the Pentagon chief replied.

Other voices are speaking more openly of the potential for an escalation of the US intervention in Libya and the broader implications of this latest military aggression. In an article Saturday on a meeting held the previous day between Obama and congressional leaders, the Wall Street Journal suggested that one of the issues discussed was the introduction of US ground forces into the country.

The Journal noted that "a larger question of the military's potential support for a humanitarian relief operation, which could require the presence of US troops on Libyan soil, remains unanswered." It continued: "Some observers have asked if air strikes would be enough. 'There's no solution unless you put boots on the ground,' said Jay Garner, a retired Army general. 'That's a dilemma the president and everyone else are realizing.'"

The same edition of the Journal carried a commentary by Democrat John Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, hailing the US-NATO attack on Libya as a precedent-setting development with far broader implications than Libya alone. Kerry suggested that similar supposedly humanitarian grounds could be used to move against other regimes in the region, and he singled out Iran, writing: "Indeed, the leaders of Iran should pay close attention to the resolve exhibited by the international community."

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