

Imperialist Powers Prepare Escalation of Libyan War

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The United States, Britain and France are moving towards a significant escalation of the war against Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi, with leaders of the US-backed rebellion calling for the deployment of ground troops from the NATO powers, as well as stepped-up bombing.

The impetus for escalation comes from the evident failure of the initial intervention, which combined heavy NATO bombing with an offensive by the US-backed rebel forces based in eastern Libya, with their headquarters and political center in Benghazi.

Over the weekend, Gaddafi's forces continued to hold the military initiative in both eastern and western Libya. In the east, heavy shelling of the key crossroads city of Ajdabiya sent "hundreds" of anti-Gaddafi fighters into headlong retreat, according to press reports. At the same time, Gaddafi's forces tightened their siege of Misrata, the only major city in western Libya under opposition control, pushing into the center of the city.

Press reports from Ajdabiya suggested a major setback for the anti-Gaddafi forces. The New York Times reported on its web site late Sunday, "Scores of rebel pickup trucks and other vehicles could be seen leaving the eastern approaches of Ajdabiya, headed toward the rebel capital of Benghazi, about 85 miles north. Explosions could be heard in the city... Many of the fighters were clearly jittery and frightened."

Misrata is Libya's third-largest city, with a population of nearly 600,000. Anti-Gaddafi forces seized control of it when the Libyan rebellion first broke out in mid-February. It is now being attacked from the west, south and east by Gaddafi's troops, while opposition forces cling to a zone along the coast, including the port, their last lifeline to the outside world.

A spokesman for the city council in Misrata appealed Saturday for NATO to send troops to defend the port, according to the Washington Post. Much of the city has been reduced to rubble by incessant shelling and rocketing, and Gaddafi's forces have been hit repeatedly by NATO warplanes.

Misrata has replaced Benghazi, the rebel capital in eastern Libya, as the main focus of a propaganda campaign to justify further imperialist military intervention on "humanitarian" grounds. Obama invoked the supposed danger of mass slaughter in Benghazi as the pretext for beginning the bombing of Libya last month. Now the same type of argument is being made in relation to Misrata.

In their joint letter published Friday, Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy described the Gaddafi government's attack on Misrata as a "medieval siege...to strangle its population into submission."

Government spokesmen and media pundits in the US, Britain and France have openly

compared the city to Srebrenica, the Bosnian town where 8,000 Muslim men and boys were slaughtered by Bosnian Serb forces in a single day in 1995.

The analogy is ludicrous on many levels, not least of which is the scale of the bloodshed. According to the Washington Post—which can hardly be accused of pro-Gaddafi bias—“Doctors reached through Skype said five people died in Misrata on Saturday, bringing the death toll there to 36 in the past three days alone and at least 276 since the siege began in late February.”

There is no doubt that conditions are terrible in Misrata; that is the nature of civil war. But the claims of mass murder and even genocide have a political purpose: to justify support for the US-NATO war against Libya, particularly from liberal and “left” organizations in the United States and Western Europe. These groups have shifted openly and decisively into the camp of imperialism, abandoning the “antiwar” posture they adopted during the Bush administration’s war in Iraq.

In the US, the main support for the war in Libya comes from congressional Democrats and liberal media outlets like the New York Times, now allied with the remnant of discredited neoconservatives who spearheaded the invasion of Iraq.

In Europe, the German Greens, the French New Anti-Capitalist Party and the British pseudo-lefts in the orbit of the Labour Party have all fervently backed military intervention to overthrow Gaddafi, with the Greens denouncing German Chancellor Angela Merkel for her reluctance to commit German troops and warplanes.

On Friday, the US and British media gave extensive coverage to a claim by the US-based Human Rights Watch that Gaddafi’s forces were using cluster bombs in Misrata. A spokesman for the regime in Tripoli said that Libya did not even possess cluster bombs in its military inventory.

The charge is completely hypocritical, given that the United States has flatly rejected international appeals to ban cluster bombs, which spread thousands of tiny bomblets when they explode, each one capable of killing or maiming people.

Cluster bombs were widely used by the US forces in Iraq and by the Israeli military during its invasion of south Lebanon in 2006. There are hundreds if not thousands of instances where Iraqi and Lebanese children have been killed or wounded after picking up the bomblets, which can remain embedded in the soil for years.

Again, the primary purpose of such charges is war propaganda. As the British newspaper The Observer wrote Sunday: “Evidence that Gaddafi’s forces are now targeting cluster bombs on civilian neighbourhoods of Misrata is likely to fuel calls for accelerated action from NATO...”

Another red herring is the sudden show of concern over the fate of an estimated 10,000 foreign workers trapped in Misrata by the fighting. According to the International Organization for Migration, these include 3,000 from Egypt, 3,000 from Niger, 1,000 from Chad and 800 from Ghana. A Greek ferry took 1,200 of these refugees to safety on Saturday.

But as a report in the British daily The Independent—also a decidedly pro-war

publication—pointed out, “it was not just the [Gaddafi] regime that these men and their families had grown to fear. Some of the inmates of Ghafr Ahmed camp, mainly from Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh, had lost their lives in clashes with the revolutionary forces who control parts of this city under siege. Others had been arrested and accused of being mercenaries.”

Two refugees were shot dead by rebel fighters when they protested conditions in the camp. Patrick Kwesi of Ghana, who had been working as a welder for an oil company, told the newspaper: “These revolutionaries would not listen to us. They just opened fire, a man near me was shot in the chest; he was not doing anything. We are being treated badly by both sides. We cannot defend ourselves and these Misrata people know this.”

British Prime Minister Cameron raised the issue of Misrata in an interview over the weekend with Sky Television. “There’s no doubt in my mind that Colonel Gaddafi is still intent on murdering people in Misrata and taking control of that large city and also pushing towards Benghazi, where I’m sure, if he ever got there, there would be a bloodbath.”

Aside from the remarkably hypothetical character of the claims—all couched in terms of the need for preventive action against what Gaddafi “will” or “might” do in the future—one could argue with equal justice that the anti-Gaddafi forces are “still intent on murdering people in Sirte” (Gaddafi’s home city, which the rebels failed to take during their offensive last month) and “also pushing towards Tripoli” where “if they ever got there, there would be a bloodbath.”

There is absolutely no reason to take sides with the “rebels” against the Gaddafi dictatorship. They represent not a genuine revolt from below, but the subversion of such a revolt by a collection of CIA agents, former Al Qaeda militants, and ex-officials of the Gaddafi regime—some of whom were singing the praises of Gaddafi as the “Brother Leader” only days before they enlisted in the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council.

The real reason for the renewed drumbeat of “humanitarian” propaganda is the debacle of the imperialist intervention so far. President Obama acknowledged Friday in an interview with the Associated Press that the NATO intervention in the two-month-old civil war had produced “a stalemate.”

French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet raised the prospect that a new UN Security Council resolution could be necessary to realize the goal of ousting Gaddafi, set out in the joint statement by Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy. “I think that three major countries saying the same thing is important to the UN,” he said. “Perhaps one day the Security Council will adopt a resolution.”

French officials have repeatedly called for reinforcement of the NATO air campaign, either by deploying additional planes from countries which have not been participating, or by a return of the US warplanes that spearheaded the initial assault but have since been put on standby status.

Meanwhile, the Washington Post, in an editorial Sunday, denounced the Obama administration’s policy as incoherent and counterproductive, and called for a major escalation of the bombing, particularly the deployment of AC-130 and A-10 ground attack planes against Gaddafi’s troops, tanks and artillery.

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