

## Italy Breaks Ranks Over NATO's Libya Mission

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ROME (AFP) – Italy called for a suspension of hostilities in Libya on Wednesday in the latest sign of dissent within NATO as the civilian death toll mounts and Moamer Kadhafi shows no signs of quitting power.

“We have seen the effects of the crisis and therefore also of NATO action not only in eastern and southwestern regions but also in Tripoli,” Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini told a parliamentary committee meeting.

“I believe an immediate humanitarian suspension of hostilities is required in order to create effective humanitarian corridors,” while negotiations should also continue on a more formal ceasefire and peace talks, he said.

“I think this is the most urgent and dramatic point,” Frattini continued.

“I think it is legitimate to request ever more detailed information on the results” of the NATO mission, he added, condemning “the dramatic errors that hit civilians, which is clearly not an objective of the NATO mission.”

France, which has taken the lead in military operations against Kadhafi, immediately ruled out any pause in the Libya campaign.

“The coalition and the countries that met as the Abu Dhabi contact group two weeks ago were unanimous on the strategy: we must intensify the pressure on Kadhafi,” French foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero told reporters.

“Any pause in operations would risk allowing him to play for time and to reorganise. In the end, it would be the civilian population that would suffer from the smallest sign of weakness on our behalf,” he said.

Despite repeated calls for unity within NATO on its air strikes, the strain has begun to show in the alliance and Norway's recent decision to withdraw from operations sparked fears others may follow.

“The alliance is coming unstuck,” Natalino Ronzitti from the Rome-based International Affairs Institute, told AFP.

“There's an air of dissent from some members, not only because of the huge cost but also because it's not clear the recent air attacks are entirely legitimate under the United Nations

resolution,” he said.

As NATO admitted to bombing errors in recent days which killed 24 civilians, including five children, Italy — a cautious partner in the Libyan mission from the beginning — said the alliance’s credibility was at risk.

On June 1 NATO decided to extend its three-month mission until the end of September, despite warnings from US Defence Secretary Robert Gates that the alliance lacked assets and was over-reliant on American help.

The 28-nation alliance responded to doubts about the sustainability of the mission on Tuesday, insisting that all allies and partners had agreed to provide the necessary assets for “as long as it takes.”

“There is the commitment, there are the assets in place and time is not on Kadhafi’s side,” NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said at a briefing.

Tensions within the Italian government have run high over the topic, with the small but influential anti-immigration Northern League calling on Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to halt Italy’s participation in Libyan air raids.

Driven by an isolationist foreign policy, the League — Berlusconi’s coalition partner in government — has said the campaign is not only a waste of money but risks making thousands of refugees flee Libya for Italian shores.

In Britain, senior army figures have warned Prime Minister David Cameron that demand that continuing beyond the summer would threaten Britain’s ability to carry out future missions.

Cameron on Tuesday rebuffed the caution and said Britain would continue the operation “as long as is necessary.”

US President Barack Obama is facing his own difficulties at home where members of Congress are threatening to cut off funding for the fighting, accusing him of failing to secure congressional authorisation for the mission.

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