

Libya says NATO raids killed 718 civilians

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Global Research, June 05, 2011

AFP and Sydney Morning Herald 5 June
2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Libya has accused NATO of killing 718 civilians and wounding 4,067 in 10 weeks of air strikes, as African efforts for a truce stalled and Italy said Muammar Gaddafi's regime is "finished."

The toll of dead and injured was given at a news conference on Tuesday in Tripoli by government spokesman Mussa Ibrahim, who also warned the departure of Gaddafi would be a "worst case scenario" for Libya.

"Since March 19, and up to May 26, there have been 718 martyrs among civilians and 4,067 wounded - 433 of them seriously," Ibrahim said, citing health ministry figures which cannot be independently verified,

Advertisement: Story continues below He said these figures do not include Libyan military casualties, a toll the defence ministry refuses to divulge.

"If Gaddafi goes, the security valve will disappear," Ibrahim said, ruling out that the embattled strongman will step down from power.

"Gaddafi's departure would be the worst case scenario for Libya," he told reporters, and warned of "civil war."

Ibrahim also denied that South African President Jacob Zuma, who met Gaddafi in Tripoli on Monday, had discussed an "exit strategy" with him.

Zuma "never discussed any exit strategies as they have been described in the media," the spokesman said.

Earlier, a statement from the South African presidency in Pretoria said Gaddafi would not leave Libya despite growing international pressure and intensified NATO strikes on his regime.

"Colonel Gaddafi called for an end to the bombings to enable a Libyan dialogue. He emphasised that he was not prepared to leave his country, despite the difficulties," Zuma's office said in a statement.

NATO pounded Tripoli earlier on Tuesday, only hours after Zuma left Libya's capital having failed to close the gap between Gaddafi and rebels fighting to oust him since February.

In its latest operational update, NATO said on Tuesday it struck four military sites in the

vicinity of Tripoli, including missile launchers, a vehicle storage facility and a radar.

Elsewhere it took out a command and control node and several tanks, truck-mounted guns and other military vehicles in and around Misrata, the main rebel-held city in western Libya.

Zuma said raids by NATO, which is enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya and protecting civilians from a government crackdown under a UN mandate, were undermining African mediation efforts.

South African Foreign Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane called for an immediate ceasefire after Zuma said Gaddafi was "ready" to implement an African Union peace plan already rejected by NATO and the rebels.

In the rebel capital Benghazi, in eastern Libya, Italy's foreign minister said on Tuesday Gaddafi's regime was already staring at defeat.

"The Gaddafi regime is finished, he must leave office, he must leave the country," Franco Frattini told a joint news conference with Ali al-Essawi, the rebels' foreign affairs chief.

"His aides have left, he has no international support, the G8 leaders reject him, he must go."

Frattini was speaking ahead of a ceremony to inaugurate a new Italian consulate in the eastern city, in another major blow to Gaddafi after NATO insisted his "reign of terror" is nearing an end.

Italy, the former colonial ruler of Libya and strategic economic partner with Gaddafi's regime, has joined international calls led by Britain, France and the United States for the Libyan leader to go.

In Washington, State Department spokesman said US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will visit the United Arab Emirates on June 9 for a meeting of the Libya contact group.

"This meeting will build on the last contact group meeting held in Rome," and will allow the United States and its partners to discuss implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1970 and 1973, Mark Toner told reporters.

UN under secretary general B Lynn Pascoe told the UN Security Council meanwhile that at least 1,200 people have been killed or are missing after trying to flee Libya by boat since the start of the uprising against Gaddafi mid-February.

At the same time, the official TAP news agency reported from Tunis on Tuesday that five more officers have joined the flow of defectors from Gaddafi's regime, arriving at the weekend in neighbouring Tunisia.

The colonel and four lieutenant colonels as well as four rank-and-file soldiers arrived by boat on Sunday, the report said.

In Rome on Monday, five generals, two colonels and a major announced they had defected from Gaddafi's forces, calling on other officers to follow their example.

Abdel Rahman Shalgham, a former foreign minister who was Tripoli's UN representative before switching sides, told a news conference that around 120 officers had defected in

recent days.

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