

NATO-Backed Forces Move into Tripoli

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The Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi appeared on the brink of collapse Sunday night, as ground forces of the NATO-backed Transitional National Council entered Tripoli, the capital city, from the west, south and east.

There were television reports Sunday night from neighborhoods of Tripoli where police and soldiers of the Gaddafi regime had fled and the anti-Gaddafi forces were in control. Other neighborhoods, particularly in the eastern half of the city, were said to be engulfed in heavy fighting between supporters and opponents of the regime, with hundreds dead.

Many units of the Libyan military were said to have fled their positions without a fight, including, significantly, the 32nd Brigade, a supposedly elite unit under the command of the longtime Libyan ruler's son, Khamis. An Associated Press report said the military unit charged with the defense of downtown Tripoli and Muammar Gaddafi's personal security had surrendered.

The same report said that rebel forces had reached Girgash, a neighborhood only a mile and a half from Green Square, the center of Tripoli and the symbolic heart of the regime, where Gaddafi's supporters held rallies over the past five months in defiance of the NATO bombing campaign.

TNC officials claimed to have captured two of Gaddafi's sons, including Seif al-Islam, the most politically influential son and the main public spokesman for the regime throughout the six months of civil war.

The Gaddafi regime, in power for 42 years, seemingly crumbled in the 48 hours following the fall of Zawiyah, an oil-refining city 30 miles west of Tripoli. Zawiyah was a battleground for nearly a week, with rebel forces moving into it from the west and south, backed by intense air bombardment by NATO warplanes.

The decisive two-day battle for the central square of the city culminated in air strikes that incinerated the last stronghold of the pro-regime forces, in the upper floors of the city's only large hotel. The fall of Zawiyah cut off Tripoli's supply lines to the west and marked the loss of the last remaining source of fuel for the government, a vital necessity for its tanks and other military vehicles.

The TNC forces consolidated their hold over Zawiyah on Saturday, and on the same day made breakthroughs in Zlitan, 85 miles east of Tripoli, where troops advancing from Misrata, Libya's third-largest city, overcame heavy resistance, and in Brega, 420 miles southeast of Tripoli, where pro-Gaddafi troops were driven out of another refinery town.

In each of these battles, NATO forces, in the air and on the ground, played the decisive role, and there was little or no mass involvement by the Libyan people themselves.

The internal disintegration of the Gaddafi regime foreshadowed the final breakdown. Three top aides or former officials fled the country in the past week. Interior Minister Nassr al-Mabrouk Abdullah fled to Cairo with his family, former deputy prime minister Abdel Salam Jalloud fled to rebel-held territory in the western mountains, and the regime's top oil official, Omran Abukraa, defected to Tunisia.

The sudden collapse of Gaddafi's forces seems in large measure the product of the NATO bombing campaign, which has included nearly 20,000 sorties, with more than 7,500 strikes against ground targets. Press reports suggested that the air strikes had intensified greatly in the last two weeks, and were closely coordinated with the offensive by opposition ground troops.

According to a report by the Los Angeles Times, despite the claims that the United States has taken a back seat in the war in Libya, "the Pentagon is now the second-largest player in the air war, racking up 16 percent of strike sorties," with only the French conducting more attacks.

Without any public announcement, the Obama administration has authorized US forces to fill in the gaps as smaller European NATO powers like Norway have exhausted their inventories of bombs and pulled back from the war.

Numerous media reports, particularly in the British press, which is anxious to highlight the contribution of British warplanes and special forces, confirm that the collapse of the Gaddafi regime is the byproduct of imperialist intervention, not popular revolt.

"The overwhelming game-changer in the war has been international support for the rebels," the Independent wrote Saturday. The newspaper described the scene in Zintan, southwest of Tripoli, a key center of the "rebels," where their reporter encountered "a group of Western men in unmarked combat clothing, watchful, carrying guns. They were shy to speak to me and would not say who they were. According to rebel fighters, the current success in the field has been due to the planning carried out by these 'advisers.'"

A second report in the Independent, published Sunday, declared: "The regime forces, after being pulverised for months by NATO, do not appear to have the capabilities to break through the rebels and re-establish a lifeline to the outside world. The rebels are still pretty inept, but they are receiving training and considerable assistance from Western former forces contractors, who are now planning and accompanying their missions."

The Guardian recounted one incident from the battle in Zlitan, in which dozens of rebel troops were killed in heavy fighting, until a NATO warplane attacked and destroyed a T-72 tank that was wreaking havoc. The newspaper cited a rebel soldier who "thought the air strike had been called in by a British forward air controller who has become a familiar sight on the front lines west of Misrata in recent weeks."

Reports in the US, British and Arab press uniformly describe the final push into Tripoli as an offensive "coordinated" between the Transitional National Council and NATO, with the imperialist alliance dropping the pretense that its military operations are aimed at defending civilians from the Gaddafi regime, and effectively admitting that its goal all along has been

regime change.

The Associated Press wrote: “Libyan rebels said Saturday that they had launched their first attack on Tripoli in coordination with NATO and gun battles and mortar rounds rocked the city. NATO aircraft also made heavy bombing runs after nightfall, with loud explosions booming across the city.”

The New York Times reported Sunday, “NATO troops continued close air support of the rebels all day, with multiple strikes by alliance aircraft helping clear the road to Tripoli from Zawiyah. Rebel leaders in the west credited NATO with thwarting an attempt on Sunday by Qaddafi loyalists to reclaim Zawiyah with a flank assault on the city.”

The security analyst service Stratfor, which has close ties to the US intelligence apparatus, observed, “It is unlikely that the rebel forces advancing from Zawiya are fighting on their own. It will be important to watch for any signs of special operations forces from participating NATO countries quietly leading the offensive and preparing operations to locate and seize Gadhafi.”

Stratfor described the assistance of special ops soldiers as “crucial for the rebels, especially when it comes to coordinating close-air support.”

Perhaps the clearest indication of the close integration of the so-called rebels and their NATO commanders was the landing of several hundred troops from Misrata on the coast just east of Tripoli, an operation that had to be monitored by NATO naval and air forces, which control all sea access to the Libyan capital.

What will replace the right-wing bourgeois Gaddafi regime is not “democracy,” but a reactionary stooge government completely dependent on the imperialist powers that waged war against Libya in order to turn the country once again into a semi-colony.

The United States and the European powers cut their deals with Gaddafi over the past decade, as the longtime ruler abandoned his radical and populist pretenses and made his peace with imperialism. But there was always an underlying concern that the interests of the giant oil companies were not really secure so long as Gaddafi remained in power.

After the initial revolt in Benghazi in February—where the Western intelligence agencies, particularly the French, likely played a role—the United States, France and Britain moved quickly to create an alternative regime and mobilize military forces against the existing government.

While the supposed pretext for intervention was to save the Libyan people from a bloodbath at the hands of Gaddafi, far more Libyans have been killed by NATO bombing—many of them conscripts in the military, as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians.

According to NATO, at least one third, and as many as half, of the personnel in Libya’s armed forces have been “degraded”—military-speak for killed or severely wounded. This may represent a death toll in the tens of thousands, although both NATO and the Gaddafi regime have, for their separate reasons, refused to give any figures on Libyan military casualties.

Already there are reports that post-Gaddafi Tripoli will be policed by outside forces from the imperialist powers and their closest stooges among the Arab states. Reuters reported that a

“bridging force” of about 1,000 regular troops from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan would be sent to the Libyan capital to keep order.

The New York Times cited the comments of one US officer, who “said that small teams of American military and other government weapons experts could be sent into Libya after the fall of Qaddafi’s regime to help Libyan rebel and other international forces secure the weapons.”

This was confirmed by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who told the military newspaper Stars & Stripes that any US personnel would consist of specialized detachments, not regular troops. “Panetta said that effort would fall to the larger diplomatic governance effort, which he sees as a function for the State Department and other NATO governments,” the newspaper said.

There are ominous indications that a bloody settling of scores is in preparation in Tripoli. The Washington Post wrote Sunday that a “Tripoli brigade” of Libyan “rebels” has “trained for months with special forces from the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar.” The commander of this brigade told the newspaper of plans to arrest “over a hundred” people in Tripoli, who were described as “high-profile Gaddafi loyalists designated as criminals and potential troublemakers.”

Reuters interviewed one “rebel” leader, Husam Nadjair, whom it described as “more concerned about the possibility of rebels turning on each other when they try to take control of the capital Tripoli than the threat posed by forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi.”

Reuters described the fighters entering Tripoli as “weighed down by factionalism and ethnic and tribal divisions. An increasing number of fighters in the Western Mountains, for instance, are growing long, thick beards, the trademark of Islamists who are likely to reject close ties with the West in a new Libya...”

Libya has only 60 years of existence as a nation-state since it was created after World War II out of three provinces, ruled for centuries by the Ottoman Empire, then brutally oppressed for three decades by Italian colonialism, which slaughtered half the Libyan population.

The US-backed monarchy was overthrown in 1969 by radical Arab nationalist officers, headed by Gaddafi. For the next four decades, he maintained his control over Libya by balancing atop an array of ethnic, tribal and religious groups, using the country’s oil wealth to buy off rivals and appease social grievances.

The imperialist-sponsored destruction of the Gaddafi regime sets the stage for an explosion of these underlying antagonisms, with horrific consequences for the people of Libya. It also threatens the transformation of Libyan territory into a base and launching pad for imperialist attacks on the popular movements in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

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