

NATO: Libyan War To Last Three Months Or Longer

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West hits Libya forces, NATO sees 90-day campaign

TRIPOLI: Western warplanes hit Libyan forces at a strategically important eastern town, trying to land a crippling blow on Muammar Gaddafi's tanks in a nearly week-old campaign that NATO says could last three months.

In Tripoli, residents reported another air raid just before dawn on Friday, hearing the roar of a warplane, followed by a distant explosion and bursts of anti-aircraft gunfire. France cautioned the conflict would not be quick. "I doubt that it will be days," Admiral Edouard Guillaud told France Info radio. "I think it will be weeks. I hope it will not take months."

Guillaud said a French plane destroyed an army artillery battery near the eastern frontline town of Ajdabiyah, 150 km (90 miles) south of Benghazi.

Ajdabiyah is strategically important for both sides as it commands the coastal highway to the west.

In London, the Ministry of Defence said British Tornado aircraft had also been active there, firing missiles overnight at Libyan military vehicles....

In Brussels, a NATO official said on Friday planning for NATO's no-fly operation assumed a mission lasting 90 days, but this could be extended or shortened as required. NATO said on Thursday that after four days of tough negotiations that it would enforce the no-fly zone The United States, embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan, is keen to step back and play a supporting role in Libya in order to preserve alliance unity and maintain the support of Muslim countries for the U.N.-mandated intervention. The United Arab Emirates said it would send 12 planes to take part in operations to enforce the no-fly zone. Qatar has already contributed two fighters and two military transport planes to help enforce the no-fly zone.

According to Greek Defence Ministry source, two Qatari and two French Mirage warplanes took off from air base of Souda in Crete, southern Greece, for patrolling mission in Libya. They would not bomb ground targets, and had only air-to-air weapons.

(Reporting by Mohammed Abbas and Angus MacSwan in Benghazi, Hamid Ould Ahmed and Christian Lowe in Algiers, Tom Perry in Cairo, David Brunnstrom in Brussels, Phil Stewart in Moscow, Andrew Quinn in Washington, Catherine Bremer, Emmanuel Jarry and Yves Clarisse in Paris, Rosalba O'Brien in London; writing by Jon Boyle; editing by Giles Elgood)

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