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Associated press

UK, Germany fly secret missions into Libya

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British and German military planes swooped into Libya's desert, rescuing hundreds of oil workers and civilians stranded at remote sites, as thousands of other foreigners are still stuck in Tripoli by bad weather and red tape.

The secret military missions into the turbulent North Africa country signal the readiness of Western nations to disregard Libya's territorial integrity when it comes to the safety of their citizens.

Three British Royal Air Force planes plucked 150 stranded civilians from multiple locations in the eastern Libyan desert before flying them to Malta on Sunday, the British Defense Ministry said in a statement. One of the RAF Hercules aircraft appeared to have suffered minor damage from small arms fire, Defence Secretary Liam Fox said.

The rescue follows a similar secret commando raid Saturday by British Special Forces that got another 150 oil workers from the remote Libyan desert.

Separately, Germany said its air force had evacuated 132 people also from the desert during a secret military mission on Saturday.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said Sunday that two German military planes landed on a private runway belonging to the Wintershall AG company, evacuating 22 Germans and 112 others and flying them to the Greek island of Crete.

Another 18 German citizens were rescued by the British military in a separate military operation Saturday that targeted remote oil installations in the Libyan desert, Westerwelle said. He said around 100 other German citizens are still in Libya and the government was trying to get them out as quickly as possible.

"I want to thank the members of the Germany military for their brave mission," Westerwelle said.

German military missions abroad need approval by parliament, and Westerwelle said he had spoken to all party leaders in parliament Friday to tell them about the upcoming military mission. He said the coalition government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel had evaluated the situation in Libya as "very dangerous" and therefore ordered an immediate evacuation by the air force.

The German foreign ministry refused to name the exact location of the company and the site where the evacuation took place.

The head of Wintershall, Rainer Seele, thanked the government.

"We are all relieved and grateful," he was quoted as saying by the DAPD news agency.

Prior to their secret missions in Libya, the British government had been embarrassed by earlier botched attempts to rescue its citizens stranded by the uprising in this North African nation. Its first rescue flight broke down and became stuck on a London runway on Wednesday.

But on Sunday, newspapers could not gush enough about the "daring and dramatic" military operation by two RAF Hercules planes that brought stranded citizens to Malta.

"SAS swoops in dramatic Libya rescue," the Sunday Telegraph headline read, in reference to the storied Special Air Service.

The mission was risky because Britain sent the planes in without obtaining prior Libyan permission, Foreign Secretary William Hague said.

One evacuee said his military plane was supposed to carry around 65 people out of Libya, but quickly grew to double that.

"It was very cramped but we were just glad to be out of there," Patrick Eyles, a 43-year-old Briton, said at Malta International Airport.

As thousands finally made it to safety on the Greek island of Crete, two ships trying to ferry foreigners out of Libya were still struggling to leave Tripoli, delayed by officialdom and rough seas. A Russian-chartered ferry arrived at a Libyan port further east to pick up more than 1,000 people.

The UK frigate HMS Cumberland also returned to the eastern Libyan port of Benghazi from Malta to evacuate more people.

Lt. Cmdr. James Farrant of the ship said they were expecting 250 to 400 evacuees. Because of adverse weather conditions and rough seas the first trip to Malta lasted nearly two days, he said.

One of those waiting to board the ship was oil company worker Mike Broadbent, who together with other colleagues made a six-hour trip from a southern oil field after realizing that no help was coming.

"We did a high speed drive across the desert — foot down, fingers crossed," said Broadbent, who works for Zueitina Oil Company.

Thousands of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Somalis, Ethiopians and others spilled out of a row of port side shelters and shivered in the strong winds and torrential rains. These are some of the foreigner workers whose governments have not organized evacuation for them. Many work for Chinese and Turkish construction firms.

On Crete, three more ships arrived from the eastern Libyan port of Benghazi early Sunday carrying about 4,200 passengers, mostly Chinese but also 750 Bangladeshis and 200 Vietnamese, authorities said. Air China planned four flights Sunday from Crete, carrying about 1,200 Chinese back to their homeland.

Another ferry from Benghazi with 2,000 more Chinese was expected to reach Crete on Monday night, shipping agents said.

The sheer numbers of foreigners leaving Libya as Moammar Gadhafi's regime battles anti-government protesters has been staggering. At least 20,000 Chinese, 15,000 Turks and 1,400 Italians had been evacuated, most working in the construction and oil industries.

In addition, some 22,000 people have fled across the Libyan border to Tunisia and another 15,000 crossed the border into Egypt, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council.

Italy's San Giorgio military ship arrived in Sicily on Sunday, carrying about 250 people, half of them Italian.

"Having come back to Italy is a miracle to us, we couldn't wait to get back," Francesco Baldassarre, an Italian evacuated with his father Gino, told the ANSA news agency.

One cruise ship carried some 1,750 evacuees — mostly from Vietnam and Thailand — from Libya to Malta early Sunday, and another ship reached the Athens port of Piraeus carrying 390 evacuees, chiefly Brazilians, Portuguese and British.

In Tripoli, Henri Saliba, managing director of Virtu Ferries, said the ferry San Gwann was accepting anyone and was almost at capacity with more than 400 passengers. The Maria Dolores ferry has been chartered by a private company and has some 90 passengers on board.

They started taking passengers on Saturday evening but Libyan police only let people board in a trickle. Then bad weather on Sunday morning prevented their departure. Saliba said the ferries hope to leave Tripoli on Sunday evening and arrive in Valletta, Malta, on Monday.

He said conditions at Tripoli's port were safe and calm.

The Interfax news agency, citing Russia's Emergencies Ministry, said the St. Stephan ferry had docked in the central Libyan port of Ras Lanuf, where it was taking aboard 1,126 evacuees, including 124 Russians.

Two Turkish frigates evacuating more than 1,700 people were expected to arrive in Turkey's Mediterranean port of Marmaris late Sunday. Four other Turkish civilian ships — escorted by the Turkish navy — were also on their way to evacuate more people from three Libyan ports — Tripoli, Misrata and Ras Lanuf.

Turkey had up to 30,000 citizens mostly working in construction projects in Libya before the trouble began. It was not clear how many more needed to be evacuated.

A plane carrying 185 evacuees also landed Sunday at Boryspil Airport in Kiev.