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Inter Service Press

## US Edges Towards Libyan Rebel Recognition

Posted By Jim Lobe

March 10, 2011

As the tide of battle appeared to shift for the first time Thursday in favor of forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, the United States and its European allies moved closer toward intervening – if not yet militarily – on the side of the insurgency.

In testimony before Congress, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that she will meet with rebel leaders when she travels to France, Tunisia and Egypt in the coming week. She also said Washington had suspended relations with Libya's embassy here.

At the same time, President Barack Obama's national security adviser, Thomas Donilon, said the administration is sending humanitarian assistance teams into eastern Libya with the cooperation of rebel authorities there, presumably to prepare for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

In a teleconference with reporters, Donilon said Washington and its NATO allies continue to move maritime and other assets into the region for other possible contingencies, including enforcing a U.N. Security Council arms embargo on the regime, imposing a no-fly zone (NFZ) to prevent Gadhafi from using his warplanes over contested areas, and "a full range of additional options", notably "additional kinds of supplies to the opposition".

"We've been directly engaged with the opposition groups in learning about the [governing] structures that have been emerging, the leadership, who they are, who they represent, and what

their goals are," he said, adding that the rebels appeared to be in de facto control of over half of Libya's 6.5 million people.

The latest U.S. steps came as France and Portugal became the first Western governments to formally recognize the rebel Libyan National Council as the "legitimate representative of the Libyan people".

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who, according to an AFP report, will urge Friday's emergency European Union (EU) meeting in Brussels to consider air attacks against key Gadhafi command centers, also announced that Paris will soon send an ambassador to the new government in Benghazi, the eastern city where the rebellion began.

His announcements came as Gadhafi forces appeared to gain the upper hand over the past 24 hours. After a series of battles over the past several days, rebel forces reportedly lost control of Zawiya, about 50 kms west of Tripoli, and withdrew under fire from the strategic oil port of Ras Lanuf, effectively dashing for now their hopes of advancing westwards toward the capital.

The latter marked an important victory for Gadhafi, whose son, Seif al-Islam Gadhafi, suggested that pro-regime forces would now move eastward toward Benghazi. "I send a message to our brothers and friends in the east who are sending us daily calls for help and asking us to rescue them: We're coming," he reportedly told a rally in the capital.

The rebels are "in for a tough row", Obama's Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Gen. James Clapper told a Senate hearing here Thursday. Given Gadhafi's greater logistical resources and weaponry, he said, "I think, from a standpoint of attrition ...in the longer term that the regime will prevail."

While Donilon agreed that Gadhafi held certain strictly military advantages at the moment, he insisted that Clapper's assessment did not take account of a number of other factors, noting, in particular, that "the international community is engaged in an increasingly deep way with the opposition," and that such engagement is likely to deepen in the coming days.

Precisely how it will do so – and what Washington's role will be – has become the source of a raging public debate between neoconservative hawks and liberal interventionists who favor military action, unilaterally if necessary, on the one hand, and foreign policy "realists" both in and outside the administration, on the other.

While the imposition of strong diplomatic and economic sanctions – the Obama administration froze some 32 billion dollars in U.S.-based Libyan assets last week – against Gadhafi have been applauded by virtually all factions here, the two sides have disagreed strongly over what, if any, military measures should be taken to protect the rebels and their civilian supporters and under what circumstances.

The hawks have gone so far as to suggest the insertion of U.S. Special Forces to train and fight alongside the rebels in a repeat of Washington's campaign against the Taliban in late 2001, while

others have called on Washington to at least begin supplying insurgents with the arms they need to defend themselves, if not retake the offensive.

The most commonly discussed measure, however, has been the imposition of an NFZ, similar to the one imposed against Saddam Hussein over Iraqi Kurdistan from 1992 to 2003, that would prevent Gadhafi from using warplanes to bomb rebel positions or the civilian population. With growing urgency, rebel leaders have called for such a move, as has the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

But even while insisting they are planning for such a contingency, senior officials have argued, as Clinton did Thursday, that such an NFZ would be relatively ineffective, because most of the killing in Libya has been carried out by ground troops and low-flying helicopters.

Senior Pentagon officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have been particularly scornful of the idea not only because of its doubtful effectiveness, but also because the deployment of "the U.S. military in another country in the Middle East" would further strain an already- overstretched force and risk a regional backlash.

Despite growing pressure by neoconservative and liberal hawks, the administration clearly hopes that a direct military commitment of the kind required by an NFZ will not be necessary. Indeed, at a closed meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels Thursday, Gates, joined by his German counterpart, repeated his reservations, according to reports which said that no consensus on anything beyond the delivery of humanitarian assistance and enforcement of the arms embargo had been reached

To the great frustration of neoconservatives, in particular, the administration has also made clear that it will not take unilateral action – least of all, military action – without a strong regional, if not international, consensus behind it.

Most independent analysts here have predicted that an NFZ – or any other military action – is unlikely to be approved by the U.N. Security Council, given the almost certain opposition of veto-wielding Russia and China. Council members Turkey and Brazil have also publicly objected to the proposal.

As a result, the administration is looking for both guidance and support from regional organizations, including the EU, which holds an emergency summit Friday, the Arab League, which meets Saturday in Cairo, and the African Union which has been meeting since Thursday in Addis Ababa.

"We do seek regional support; this is really important," said Donilon. "And it's not just regional rhetorical support. We're going to be seeking actual support by those nations – the Arab League, the GCC and the African nations – to participate in any of these efforts as they go forward. Again, not just rhetorical support, but actual participation, which we think is absolutely critical."