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US-NATO warplanes strike Libyan ground forces

by Bill Van Auken
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US and NATO warplanes turned their firepower Wednesday against ground forces loyal to the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The change in tactics is a further demonstration that the war in Libya is driven not by humanitarian concerns, but rather the imperialist aims of dominating the country and seizing its oil wealth.

The air strikes on the fifth day of the war targeted pro-government forces battling for control of the coastal city of Misrata, about 130 miles east of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and Ajdabiya, the strategic highway junction just 100 miles south of Benghazi, the stronghold of the anti-Gaddafi insurgency.

The British *Guardian* reported Wednesday: “Nearly 12 hours of allied air strikes have virtually wiped out Muammar Gaddafi’s forces that were attacking the rebel-held town of Misrata.” It quoted residents of the town as saying the attacks, which began shortly after midnight, continued until 11:30 Wednesday morning. A former hospital used as a headquarters for the military force was almost destroyed by the bombing. Attacks were also carried out against the nearby air force academy and airport.

Bombing of sites in the capital has also continued, with new explosions heard in Tripoli Wednesday night. The government reports that the attacks have killed and wounded civilians.

Speaking via audio link to Pentagon reporters from the USS Mount Whitney, the flagship for US naval forces in the Mediterranean, Rear Adm. Gerard Hueber, the chief of staff of the US-led task force, said: "We are interdicting and putting pressure on Gaddafi's ground forces that are attacking civilian populations in cities." He said the attacks would continue so long as pro-government forces continued to contest control of Ajdabiya and Misrata.

"We have no indication that the Gaddafi forces are adhering to the UN Security [Council] resolution 1973, and that is why we continue to pressurize those forces." Hueber said.

Meanwhile, a British air force commander, Air Vice Marshal Greg Bagwell, told reporters at a NATO base in southern Italy that the Libyan air force had been destroyed "as a fighting force" and NATO aircraft were able to operate with "near impunity" over the entire country.

According to NATO officials, by Wednesday US, British and French warplanes had flown 300 sorties against Libyan targets and the country had been struck by more than 162 Tomahawk cruise missiles, virtually all of them fired from US warships. The number of sorties flown during the 24-hour period ending at noon on Wednesday reached 97.

The inevitable byproduct of these attacks on ground troops fighting in urban areas will be the slaughter of civilians hit by US, British and French bombs and missiles.

As the attacks have intensified, the operation has drawn increasing international criticism. After meeting with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Moscow, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov called for an immediate ceasefire and accused the US-led forces of killing civilians with their bombing campaign.

The civilian deaths, he said, "shouldn't have been let to happen and we informed our US counterparts of our opposition." Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, after talks with Gates, accused the US-led forces of carrying out "indiscriminate" air strikes.

China similarly called for a ceasefire. "The UN resolution on the no-fly zone over Libya aimed to protect civilians," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters. "We oppose abuse of force causing more civilian casualties." Both Russia and China abstained on the vote for the UN resolution, refusing to exercise their veto on the Security Council.

Turkey's government, which has provided warships for a blockade of the Libyan coast and called for Gaddafi to step down, also criticized the attack, undoubtedly in an attempt to assuage mass opposition among the Turkish people. Hinting at the real motivation behind the war, Turkish President Abdullah Gul told reporters: "The issue is essentially about peoples' freedom and ending oppression... but unfortunately it is obvious that some countries are driven by opportunism. Some who until yesterday were closest to the dictators and sought to take advantage of them... display an excessive behavior today and raise suspicions of secret intentions."

Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, warned Tuesday that "we have seen in the past that such operations... increase loss of life, turn into occupation and seriously harm the countries' unity."

Algeria, which borders on Libya and is part of the Arab League, whose resolution calling for a no-fly zone is incessantly cited as justification for the aggression, called the attacks "disproportionate."

As for Arab support, which the US and its allies have maintained is critical for the Libyan intervention, it has so far been invisible. Qatar, the tiny sheikdom which is the sole Arab League member to offer its services, is expected to send a total of three aircraft for the no-fly zone sometime next week.

Statements made by both President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Gates on the Libyan intervention made it clear that as far as Washington is concerned the "humanitarian" aims of the war cannot be realized outside of regime change in Tripoli and the installation of a puppet government under US-NATO tutelage, something that is in no way broached in the UN resolution.

Speaking in San Salvador on the last leg of his Latin American tour, Obama claimed that the US-British-French intervention had "averted immediate tragedy," based on the claim that Gaddafi's forces were about to carry out a massacre in the city of Benghazi, which the media, in promoting the war, likened to the genocidal slaughter in Rwanda. While the Gaddafi regime has no doubt been brutal in its repression, there is no evidence of such massacres in the cities which it has regained from insurgent control.

Obama continued, declaring: "As long as Gaddafi remains in power—unless he changes his approach and provides the Libyan people the opportunity to express themselves freely and there are significant reforms by the Libyan government, and he steps down—there's still going to be a potential threat to the Libyan people."

The UN resolution sanctions military action to halt the "threat" of attacks on civilians. Ergo, according to Obama and his imperialist counterparts, they have a green light to oust Gaddafi and do as they wish with Libya.

Claiming that Washington would cede the leadership of the war, which is broadly opposed by the American people, to the European powers, Obama warned that "Gaddafi may try to hunker down and wait it out even in the face of a no-fly zone, even though his forces have been degraded." The US would continue using both "military tools" and "international sanctions" to force his ouster, Obama said.

Secretary of Defense Gates, speaking in Cairo, stressed that the duration of the war on Libya is open-ended. "The no-fly zone is not time-limited by the Security Council resolution," he said. "So I think that there is no current time line in terms of when it might end."

Gates continued: “I think we will be assessing this as we go along in terms of when his [Gaddafi’s] capabilities to do things to his people have been eliminated. But I think no one was under any illusions that this would be an operation that would last one week, or two weeks, or three weeks.”

Eliminating a government’s “capabilities” to do anything to its own people effectively means destroying its military and security forces and overthrowing it.

Gates’s presence in Cairo is itself highly revealing about the character of the imperialist intervention in Libya. He is the second high-ranking US official to visit the Egyptian capital in the wake of last month’s ouster of the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak as a result of a mass uprising of the Egyptian people. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held talks with top Egyptian military and civilian officials just last week.

Gates voiced his satisfaction with the policies of the post-Mubarak military regime and stressed the need to “advance stability” based upon “the longstanding relationship between the United States military and the Egyptian military and the constructive role the Egyptian military has played in the events of the past couple of months.”

Gates arrived in Cairo on the same day that the military-controlled government issued a decree outlawing all protests, demonstrations, strikes or sit-ins that disrupt private or state-owned businesses or in any way affect the country’s economy. The decree provides for stiff criminal penalties for anyone calling for such actions.

The Pentagon chief also said he was discussing the military operations in Libya with Egyptian officials, including Field Marshal Tantawi, the head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

There can be little doubt that the relationship between the situation within Egypt and the war in Libya has been at the center of these discussions. Washington will provide full support for the counterrevolutionary repression being prepared by the military regime in Cairo, while the Egyptian military, which is reportedly already supplying arms to the anti-Gaddafi forces, will play a more direct role in aiding the imperialist conquest of Libya.

Gates’s remarks in Cairo underscored the grotesque level of cynicism and hypocrisy in US claims that it is intervening in Libya to protect lives and promote democracy. Turning to Yemen, where the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh has massacred scores of unarmed demonstrators over the last week and imposed a state of emergency, Gates stressed Washington’s “good working relations” with the dictator and said, “I think we will basically just continue to watch the situation. We haven’t done any post-Saleh planning.”

As for Bahrain, where the ruling monarchy broke up peaceful mass demonstrations with tanks and live fire, Gates said that he had recently visited the emirate to “express US support for the government” and urge it to “begin a process that would resolve some of the issues.”

Both Gates and Clinton made statements suggesting that Washington, which has yet to elaborate any clear strategy for its war in Libya and has no confidence that the rebels will prove capable of defeating the government forces, is hoping that intensifying military pressure will produce fissures in Gaddafi's regime, leading to either his assassination or overthrow.

"I think there are any number of possible outcomes here," said Gates, "and no one is in a position to predict them. Whether there are further defections within his own ruling circle, whether there are divisions within his family—there are a variety of possibilities, it seems to me."

Similarly, Clinton claimed in an ABC television interview Tuesday night that the State Department had "heard about people close to him reaching out to people that they know around the world, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, beyond, you know, saying what do we do? How do we get out of this? What happens next?"

What the statements of Gates and Clinton make clear is that Washington is prepared to deal with elements of the old regime and even with members of Gaddafi's family to the extent that they agree to subordinate themselves completely to the interests of US imperialism and the American-based oil conglomerates, turning Libya into another base for US operations in the region.

What the media refers to as the "pro-democracy forces" opposing Gaddafi are themselves dominated by recent defectors from the regime, along with CIA assets and other reactionary forces. These elements announced the formation Wednesday of an "interim government" in an attempt to provide a fig leaf for the imperialist intervention. At its head is a former official in the Gaddafi regime, Mahmoud Jibril, who, the opposition has stressed, was educated in the US. It was Jibril who met with Clinton in Paris and previously obtained the backing of French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Obama returned to Washington on Wednesday from his six-day Latin American trip. He has yet to even make a statement to the American people justifying his war in Libya, which comes on top of the ongoing US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nor has he sought any authorization from Congress for the use of military force.

This indifference to even the pretense of popular support or the forms of constitutional legality is not an accident. Nor is it merely a function of his having been out of the country. Rather, it is a measure of the real character of the war itself—a lawless and naked exercise in imperialist aggression in which the US ruling elite, together with the former colonial powers of the region, utilized a civil war which they themselves helped to foment as an opportunity to seize control of another oil-rich Arab nation.