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UK to send military advisers to help Libya rebels

By DAVID STRINGER and FRANCES D'EMILIO

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Britain said Tuesday it will send about a dozen senior soldiers to Libya to help organize the country's haphazard rebel forces, as international allies seek to aid the opposition's attempts to break the military stalemate.

Foreign Secretary William Hague said the U.K. military advisers would join British diplomats already cooperating with rebel leaders in the eastern rebel-held city of Benghazi, but insisted they would not help arm the opposition or assist in military operations against strongman Moammar Gadhafi's forces.

About a dozen British military personnel, including officers with logistical and intelligence expertise, will work with the National Transitional Council, the political wing of the rebel movement — which has been officially recognized by Italy, France and Qatar.

"They will advise the National Transitional Council on how to improve their military organizational structures, communications and logistics, including how best to distribute humanitarian aid and deliver medical assistance," Hague said.

Britain has said it would not become involved in directly supplying weapons to Libya's rebels, but has sent non-lethal assistance such as 1,000 sets of body armor and 100 satellite phones.

"As the scale of the humanitarian crisis has grown, so has the urgency of increasing our efforts to defend civilians against the attack from Gadhafi forces," Hague said.

In Rome, Italy's foreign minister Franco Frattini said allies would also consider supplying Libya's rebels with technical equipment such as radars or systems to intercept and block telecommunications. He said the issues would be discussed at a meeting of the international contact group on Libya, scheduled to take place in Rome next month.

"We have condemned the regime's violence, the presence of snipers on the rooftops of Tripoli's houses and in the besieged cities," Frattini said. "We cannot say this isn't our problem."

Italy, however, remains opposed to sending ground troops, Frattini said, following talks with the leader of the Libyan rebels' transitional government, Mustafa Abdul-Jalil. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe also said Tuesday he is "totally hostile" to deploying ground troops.

"I remain for my part totally hostile to the deployment of troops on the ground," Juppe was quoted as saying during a lunch at an association of diplomatic journalists of European Union publications. The AP is not permitted to be a member. The remarks were carried on the website of the daily Le Figaro.

Abdul-Jalil said Libya's opposition is seeking assistance from its overseas allies on how to help Libyans stranded in the western port of Misrata and other besieged cities. Misrata has been under attack for seven weeks, and the New York-based Human Rights Watch has accused Gadhafi's forces of launching indiscriminate assaults on residential neighborhoods.

Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, the chairman of the NATO's military committee, acknowledged that the alliance is struggling to destroy mortars and rockets being fired by Gadhafi loyalists at Misrata.

He said Gadhafi retains a "still considerable" arsenal of heavy weaponry to use against Misrata, despite NATO airstrikes. The U.N. Security Council resolution on Libya, which does not allow ground forces to be deployed, means the alliance has a tough task to disable the regime's firepower, he said.

In Brussels, NATO Brig. Gen. Mark van Uhm also acknowledged that operations around Misrata were proving troublesome.

"There is a limit to what can be achieved by airpower to stop fighting in a city," he said. "We are doing everything to prevent civilian casualties by our own attacks (while) degrading (Gadhafi's) ability to sustain forces there."

During his visit to Italy, Abdul-Jalil stressed that the opposition are not looking to other nations to take out Gadhafi.

"We are not looking or inviting anybody to kill him, and we don't have such a possibility, but we hope he and his regime can leave Libya as soon as possible," he said.

Russia, which abstained in the United Nations vote that sanctioned the military operation, has continued to voice concern about civilian casualties and the excessive use of force.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted during a visit to Belgrade, Serbia on Tuesday, that the "most urgent step that must be taken is the immediate cease-fire." Opposition groups in both Libya and Yemen will not negotiate because "they expect help from abroad," he said.

"It is of principal importance that everybody should support the start of dialogue and not confrontation," Lavrov said.

Libya's Abdul-Jalil will travel to Paris for talks with President Nicolas Sarkozy on Wednesday. He said his council would have "strong cooperation first and foremost with Italy, Qatar and

France; after them come all our other friends, such as the United States and the United Kingdom."

In Geneva, The World Food Program said Tuesday it has managed to secure safe passage for aid deliveries into parts of western Libya, after Gadhafi's government indicated it would respect a humanitarian corridor agreed upon by the U.N. food agency and the Libyan Red Crescent.

The U.N. agency had signed an agreement with the Libyan Red Crescent to establish a humanitarian corridor and "we received an indication that the government did not have any objection," spokeswoman Emilia Casella said.

Separately, the U.N. humanitarian chief said she had been assured the U.N. would be permitted to visit Misrata and other cities to assess the humanitarian need.

Britain pledged Monday to give about 2 million pounds (\$3.3 million) to help evacuate about 5,000 foreign workers stranded in Misrata. The International Organization for Migration said about 930 people — including 72 Libyans and people from 20 other countries — were aboard a ship that left the city Monday and arrived in Benghazi.

Thousands of Libyans are fleeing to southern Tunisia every day to escape fighting in the country's Western Mountains region. U.N. refugee spokesman Firas Kayal in Tunisia said some 10,000 people, many of them ethnic Berbers, have arrived in the Dehiba area of southern Tunisia in the last ten days.