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France vows to step up airstrikes in Libya

By SYLVIE CORBET

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PARIS – France vowed Wednesday to step up airstrikes on Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's forces and acknowledged that it has military officers already working with Libyan rebels on the ground.

Italy joined Britain in announcing their commitment of military instructors to train the rebels, who have failed to rout Moammar Gadhafi's forces despite weeks of NATO-led airstrikes.

European powers and the Libyan opposition remained firm against sending foreign ground troops into Libya, a dangerous and politically risky step. However NATO, which is leading the U.N.-sanctioned international military operation to protect civilians, is now acknowledging that airstrikes alone cannot stop the heavy shelling of cities by Gadhafi's forces.

Gadhafi's forces attacked a mountain town and a besieged coastal city Wednesday, part of a drive to crush pockets of resistance in the western part of the country that is largely under the Libyan leader's control.

"France has placed a small number of liaison officers alongside our special envoy in (the rebel stronghold) Benghazi," French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Christine Fages said in an online briefing Wednesday.

A French diplomat said the French officers are not combat troops and are not teaching Libyan rebels weapons skills. Instead, he said, they are working on logistics and organizational help. France sent a diplomatic envoy to Benghazi earlier this month.

The diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of their operation, would not say how long the officers have been in Benghazi.

French government spokesman Francois Baroin suggested less than 10 officers were involved and insisted the move conforms to the U.N. resolution authorizing the international military campaign in Libya.

France has championed the international campaign in Libya. President Nicolas Sarkozy met Wednesday with visiting Libyan opposition leader Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, who said he asked France "to intensify the support accorded to the Libyan revolution."

"We will intensify the strikes," Sarkozy responded, according to a presidential aide. The aide was not authorized to be publicly named according to presidential policy.

"We will help you," Sarkozy promised his Libyan visitor.

A NATO official said there had been no pressure from France to increase allied strikes, but that France might increase its own contribution. The official was not authorized to be publicly named.

In Rome, Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa said 10 military instructors will be going to Libya to help the rebels, but again ruled out sending Italian ground troops.

La Russa spoke after meeting with British Defense Secretary Liam Fox, who said many of the Libyan rebels "have no military experience, they have little understanding of weaponry or military tactics."

"The best way in which we can assist them is to give them some technical capabilities in how to organize themselves," Fox said.

The British minister said the situation was "not that different from what's happening in Afghanistan, where we've decided that training up security forces so that the Afghans themselves can look after their security is the best way forward."

Britain said Tuesday it was sending up to 20 military advisers to help Libya's rebel forces.

A spokesman for Libya's National Transitional Council, the political wing of the rebel movement, said Wednesday the military advisers would be a big help.

"My understanding is that it will all be administrative help, nothing with weapons and nothing in the field," Mustafa Gheirani said.

The rebels have repeatedly said they do not want foreign troops on the ground.

French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet suggested the U.N. Security Council should weigh whether to send ground troops. "It's a real question that merits international reflection," he said after a Cabinet meeting Wednesday.

Abdel-Jalil insisted that the ragtag rebel force and fledgling opposition governing council would respect international norms if they emerge victorious in their battle with Gadhafi, who has ruled Libya for 42 years.

"We will work to build a democratic state where the chief of state arrives in power not on a tank, but by a ballot box," he said. "We are also committed to working to fight terrorism and stop illegal immigration."

Tensions over waves of illegal migrants from North Africa entering Europe in recent weeks have strained relations among European neighbors and clouded the international campaign in Libya.

NATO's top military commander, U.S. Navy Adm. James Stavridis, was in Prague for talks with Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg on Wednesday and Defense Minister Alexandr Vondra on Thursday. Stavridis' visit comes as NATO is seeking military contributions from member states that have not participated in the campaign in Libya, like the Czech Republic.