

Britain and France Escalate War in Libya

Intensified bombing, military “advisers” on the ground

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Great Britain and France, the two European powers spearheading the war against Libya, are taking new steps to escalate the military intervention. British Foreign Minister William Hague announced Tuesday that as many as 20 British military officers were going to Benghazi to direct the forces fighting Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi. France has deployed additional air capability, including the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle.

The British decision is the most fateful, since it is a clear signal that the NATO powers, including the United States, will be ultimately driven to send ground troops if the campaign of air strikes and poorly organized rebel attacks fails to oust Gaddafi.

There were conflicting reports on the advisers, with the British newspaper Guardian describing it as “a joint British-French military team”, while other news services said it was British only. The Guardian added, “The UK-French team will advise the rebels on intelligence-gathering, logistics, and communications. In an indication of the serious nature of the move, the team will be run by a joint force headquarters...” In other words, the NATO officers, not the rump group of ex-CIA, ex-Gaddafi and ex-Al Qaeda operatives, will exercise real command and control over the operations of the so-called “rebels.”

Foreign Minister Hague was at pains to deny the obvious—that the dispatch of NATO officers is a major step down the road that leads logically and inexorably to the invasion of Libya by the imperialist powers.

Referring to the new British mission, he said, “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.”

Despite the references to non-combat functions, the arrival of British officers signifies the official conversion of the “rebel” force into an imperialist-led military operation, and the dropping of any pretense that the Benghazi-based council represents an indigenous resistance to the Gaddafi regime.

The “rebels” are no more independent of the imperialist powers than the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, which was utilized by the Bush administration in 2001 to oust the Taliban and establish the puppet regime still headed by the US nominee, President Hamid Karzai.

Hague did not explain how intelligence-gathering responsibilities—necessarily connected with the direction of ground operations and targeting for NATO air strikes—could be squared with his presentation of the mission as purely humanitarian.

He claimed, "This deployment is fully within the terms of UNSCR 1973, both in respect of civilian protection and its provision expressly ruling out a foreign occupation force on Libyan soil. Consistent with our obligations under that resolution, our officers will not be involved in training or arming the opposition's fighting forces. Nor will they be involved in the planning or execution of the NTC's military operations or in the provision of any other form of operational military advice."

Only those who are hopelessly naïve or willfully blind can believe such self-evident rubbish. British military officers are not the Salvation Army. Their profession is to plan and execute combat missions. They are going to Benghazi, not to remedy a humanitarian crisis—there is none in that city, which is well equipped with food and medical supplies, and not under military attack—but to address the obvious military incapacity of the anti-Gaddafi forces, who possess neither technical skill nor combat discipline.

The Gaddafi regime contemptuously dismissed Hague's statement. Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Kaim told a news conference in Tripoli, "If there is any deployment of any armed personnel on Libyan ground, there will be fighting. The Libyan government will not take it as a humanitarian mission. It will be taken as a military mission."

The British move may actually be intended to provoke such a response. In the event that the British officers come under fire from Gaddafi's troops, NATO is likely to use this as a *casus belli* to justify the deployment of ground forces, in the name of "self-defense" for the "humanitarian" mission.

Hague's announcement of the deployment of British officers to Benghazi has sparked a debate in the British capitalist press on the logic of the escalation.

Former foreign secretary David Owen, now a Liberal peer, writing in the *Times* of London, publicly called for the creation of "safe havens" modeled on previous imperialist interventions in Bosnia and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, beginning with an exclusion zone around Misrata. "Just as Benghazi was saved within hours, so must Misrata be," he wrote. "We have probably only a few days."

Writing in the *Guardian*, columnist Simon Tisdall observed, "By suggesting that Benghazi, facing destruction last month by Gaddafi's forces, would have been a new Srebrenica but for the intervention, the allies must now, logically, offer the same level of protection to Misrata and other desperate towns. This may only be achieved by ground-based intervention."

In a statement quoted in the British press, Lord Dannatt, former head of the British army, described the dispatch of military advisers as "an entirely logical further step to achieve legitimate aims." Rebutting criticism of the move by some British MPs, he added, "Some will always say 'mission creep', but [Britain should] interpret the UN mandate broadly to avoid mission collapse."

Preventing "mission collapse" is the principal motive for the escalation of the bombing of Libya, agreed on by NATO foreign ministers at a meeting last Friday in Berlin. According to press reports. NATO commanders have revealed that the bombing was being extended from overt military targets like tanks and artillery to include satellite communications systems and even telephone exchanges, in the name of striking at "command and control" installations.

By this logic, any facility that could be used for communications purposes between the Libyan government in Tripoli and its armed forces anywhere in the country is a target for bombs and missiles.

The NATO foreign ministers heard a plea for additional strike aircraft to supplement those mobilized by France, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Norway and Belgium, the six countries actually fighting the air war in Libya. NATO officials told the press that France has taken up the slack, providing additional jets and moving the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle closer to the Libyan coast and placing its aircraft under NATO command.

Britain also stepped up its role in the air war, with the submarine HMS Triumph firing cruise missiles at Libyan targets on Monday and Tuesday. Britain has also supplied war materiel to the anti-Gaddafi forces, including 1,000 sets of body armor and 100 satellite phones.

Italian foreign minister Franco Frattini said NATO would also consider sending technical equipment like radars and communications interception systems.

In an interview with Al Jazeera English on Tuesday, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton confirmed that the EU had formally offered to deploy 1,000 soldiers to Libya's third-largest city, Misrata, which is held by the opposition but under siege by Gaddafi's troops. She said that all that was required was a request from UN officials in charge of humanitarian relief operations in Misrata.

This is different from a new mandate from the UN Security Council, where Russia and China would likely oppose authorization of the deployment of NATO ground troops in Libya. A Russian government adviser, Azhdar Kurtov of the Institute of Strategic Studies, blamed France for escalating the war because it has failed to oust Gaddafi.

"Gaddafi firmly remains in power," he said. "Each day that passes, the cost of the operation increases, and this is spurring Paris into using other methods of waging the anti-Gaddafi war."

Brigadier General Mark van Uhm, chief of allied operations for NATO, said the air strikes have destroyed more than 40 tanks and numerous armored personnel carriers mobilized by pro-Gaddafi forces. He said that more than 30 percent of Gaddafi's forces had been "eliminated," an estimate that suggests that the bombing has killed thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Libyan soldiers and militia members—a death toll that dwarfs even the most farfetched claims of civilian casualties in the civil war.

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