

European Union Prepares to send Ground Troops to Libya

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Global Research, April 11, 2011

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 11 April 2011

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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The European Union is seeking to utilise the humanitarian cover of the fate of the besieged city of Misrata to send ground troops to Libya under its command. The operation could be mounted within a matter of days. In a reversal of previous policy, the German government of Angela Merkel has offered to play the leading military role.

The EU set up a military mission (EUFOR) ostensibly to back humanitarian aid efforts in Libya on April 1, giving the United Nations a four-month window to call on it to intervene. Misrata, or Misurata, Libya's third largest city, looks set to be the initial focus of an operation that can then be easily expanded. The city has suffered heavy shelling for several weeks, though last week it received more than 600 tons of World Food Program food—enough to feed over 40,000 people for a month—and Turkey has already mounted efforts to evacuate civilians.

The €7.9 million EUFOR operation has its headquarters in Rome, under the command of Italian Rear Admiral Claudio Gaudosi. The EU has two battle groups, contingents of about 1,500 troops, ready to deploy at a few days' notice.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton has officially requested a go-ahead from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The German Press Agency DPA reported that Ashton wrote to Ban on April 7 "telling him about the EU's readiness to act."

"It's an encouragement" for the UN to ask the EU to get involved, a diplomatic source said.

Another official said, "Everybody is aware that something has to be done... You can expect that there will be a mobilization of the international community in the coming days."

A meeting of EU foreign ministers will take place as early as Tuesday in Luxembourg to discuss the plan, to be followed by a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Berlin.

The UN has called for a "temporary cessation of hostilities" to allow it to evacuate foreign workers and Libyans who want to leave. If this does not materialise, it will likely accuse the regime of Col. Muammar Gaddafi of defying the "international community" and utilize this alleged defiance as *casus belli* for military intervention.

UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorized the US-NATO air war against Libya, bans "foreign occupation," but it allows for military forces to be despatched by the major powers on the grounds of an asserted "right to protect" civilians from harm. It also sanctions the use of "all necessary measures" to this supposed end.

France has cited the same “right to protect” to justify its ongoing operations in the Ivory Coast, where French troops and helicopters are fighting directly on the side of Paris’s chosen leader, Alassane Ouattara, to dislodge the incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo. France played a leading role in advancing UN Resolution 1973, alongside the United States and Britain. It also secured UN authorisation and the participation of a UN force in the Ivory Coast.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s spokesman Steffen Seibert told a news conference Friday that German forces would be available for such a European Union “humanitarian” mission. “If there was a request from the United Nations, we would naturally not shirk our responsibility,” Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle told the Bundestag (parliament) on Friday.

Defence Ministry spokesman Christian Dienst said that if Germany did take part in the EU mission “it’s clear that German troops would then have their boots on the ground in Libya.”

The Tagesspiegel newspaper also reported that plans were in process to send German ships back to Libya. Germany is part of European Battlegroups I/2011, which is commanded by the Netherlands. It contributes 990 troops—giving it two-thirds of the manpower of the entire nominally EU combat force.

Germany had joined with China, Russia, India and Brazil in abstaining in the United Nations Security Council vote authorising military action and even withdrew its ships from the NATO mission to enforce the UN-mandated arms embargo on Libya.

What is essential in this shift is Germany’s determination not to be excluded from the re-division of oil contracts that will inevitably follow the planned installation of the opposition Transitional National Council (TNC). To date, this body is dominated by forces close to Washington and London, and Germany fears it could be deprived of a significant share of the spoils of war.

The Economist commented pointedly on the implications of German military involvement, asking, “So are we about to see the return of German troops to North Africa for the first time since the defeat of Erwin Rommel’s Afrikakorps in the Second World War?”

The magazine continued: “The EU has felt sidelined in the military phase of the Libya crisis (it has been the main forum to discuss sanctions). It has long wanted to develop more muscular military capabilities, but has been repeatedly thwarted, especially by Britain. Now it thinks that, precisely because it has a softer and less martial reputation, it may be ideally placed to help out in Misrata. ‘Until recently everybody thought European defence was dead,’ says one senior source, ‘But now it may be rising from the ashes.’”

The United States’ response to the EU initiative could be to seek direct involvement as a means of bypassing President Barack Obama’s pledge that US ground troops would not be sent to Libya. But it feels constrained in its actions and is keen not to be seen as openly dominating the war against Libya, so it can conceal its imperialist war aims.

Unlike France, Italy and Qatar, Washington has not officially recognized the opposition as the legitimate government of Libya, and has to date rejected arming it. Since transferring operational command to NATO, the US has cut its naval presence from eleven to three warships and the number of its planes involved from 170 to 90.

Last week, in his testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Gen. Carter Ham, commander of the US Africa Command and leader of the Libyan military operation until it was transferred to NATO, warned of the hostility generated in Africa by the attack on Libya.

“There is an impact and there will be an impact in the region,” he said.

There is a widespread sense in Africa that the war on Libya has nothing to do with humanitarianism and everything to do with oil. Even hitherto pliant bourgeois heads of state are worried that the eruption of neo-colonial militarism in Libya and now the Ivory Coast bodes ill for their own future.

The head of the African Union, Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang Nguema, has voiced open support for Gaddafi and demanded an end to foreign interference into an internal Libyan conflict.

“I believe that the problems in Libya should be resolved in an internal fashion and not through an intervention that could appear to resemble a humanitarian intervention. We have already seen this in Iraq,” he said.

Referring to the French/UN intervention in Ivory Coast, Nguema said that it should not “imply a war, an intervention of a foreign army.”

This weekend, the African Union sent a high-level diplomatic mission to meet with both the Libyan opposition forces and the government to urge a ceasefire. The mission was headed by South African President Jacob Zuma and included leaders from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Mauritania and Uganda.

The Saudi journal Arab News published a comment Sunday by Syed Rashid Husain entitled “Geopolitics Rears Its Ugly Head in Libya’s Turmoil.” The article begins: “‘So it was all about oil.’ Skeptics had a heyday, as the Liberian-flagged oil tanker departed the northeastern Libyan port of Marsa Al-Hariga, carrying one million barrels of oil. The shipment marked the first sale of oil by the rebel government since the uprising that began on Feb. 17.

“Traders said they believed that the payments for the sale will be made via an offshore bank account. ‘The value of this first shipment is around \$112 million and will be made in a bank account outside of Libya that the rebels would have access to,’ one of the traders was quoted as saying.”

Recognition of the TNC by “several governments, including some in Europe” meant there “would be no legal obstacle to buying oil from it or even paying it directly,” said J. Peter Pham, Africa director of the US think tank Atlantic Council.

After noting that the first cargo from rebel-held areas is heading for China, Arab News quoted former Libyan energy minister Omar Fathi Ben Shatwan, who has since fled to Malta. Shatwan led the opening up of Libyan oil contracts to the major oil conglomerates for Gaddafi. He said that in the long term, Russia and China will have lost the chance to take part in developing oil and gas fields in Libya by not supporting the rebels. “The new democracy will be good for those who helped it,” he said, such as France and Italy.

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