

Libya: New York Times Drip Feeds Truth on NATO's Civilian Atrocities

Reporting War Crimes AFTER the Facts. Ex Post Facto Investigative Journalism by the 'Paper of Record'.

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In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

Nearly two months after NATO warplanes ended their bombing campaign in Libya, the New York Times has now published "an investigation" by its staff writers that purports to show that "civilians were killed in several distinct attacks" [1]. The so-called "paper of record" goes on to say in its article published 17 December that it has found evidence that the "air campaign was not as flawless as NATO has described" – nor, it should be added, as the New York Times itself tended to report at the time of the atrocities.

NATO powers, led by the United States, Britain and France, began bombing Libya on 19 March, supposedly with a United Nations Security Council mandate to "protect civilians". Western mainstream media, including the New York Times, enthusiastically endorsed the NATO military onslaught, even though technically and legally it went well beyond the mandate to set up a "no-fly zone" over Libya purportedly to protect civilians, who were allegedly coming under attack from the state forces of Muammar Gaddafi.

The NATO bombing campaign – involving cruise missiles, fighter jets and unmanned drones – escalated over seven months until its cessation on 31 October, when it had succeeded in its unofficial objective of overthrowing the Gaddafi government, having served as the air force for anti-Gaddafi insurgents. Indeed without the might of NATO air power, it is unlikely that the rabble of so-called rebels would have made much progress beyond their stronghold in Benghazi in the far east of the North African country. Some 8,000 strike sorties were carried out by NATO warplanes, according to the Western alliance's own admission. The true figure is probably much higher.

Global Research, along with other alternative media sources, had reported on the civilian casualties and the criminality of such military strikes during the months of NATO bombardment. See this report by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, for example [2].

Nevertheless, from the outset of NATO's bombing and during the seven months of aerial attacks, the Western mainstream media served as cheerleaders for the campaign, running stories that delegitimised the Gaddafi government, exaggerated images and claims of popular support for the insurgents, scoffed at official Libyan claims of civilian atrocities committed by NATO, downplayed or did not report incidents of NATO bombing of civilian sites, and gave prominent coverage of NATO denials of civilian deaths and casualties.

Now, lo and behold, the New York Times appears to be realizing that the NATO

bombardment of Libya was indeed not “cost free”, as it tends to delicately describe civilian horrors.

“The Times has found credible accounts of dozens of civilians killed in several distinct attacks, of an attack on rebels and an ambulance that NATO explicitly denied, and of structures that seem to have been hit by mistake [sic],” it tells us.

The paper cites 13 cases of what it calls “errant NATO strikes” at locations across Libya, including the capital, Tripoli, Brega, Misurata, Surt and Zlitan. It says that the victims included women and children and the total number of fatalities at the sites it examined amounts to “at least 40 and perhaps more than 70 killed by NATO”.

A definition of the attack sites and targets visited by the NYT is not clear; at different points in its report, the paper talks of 13 cases, 25 sites and 150 targets, including bunkers, buildings and vehicles. But what is clear is that the number of civilian casualties that the NYT reports as being “at least 40 and perhaps more than 70” – only from its examinations – would be a tiny fraction of the total number of civilian deaths committed by NATO across Libya during the entire seven months.

With nearly 8,000 strike sorties admitted by NATO and taken as a conservative estimate of the actual number, it may be reasonably estimated that the actual number of civilian deaths inflicted by NATO across Libya amount to several thousand. This is a damning conclusion to Western government militaries acting with what was supposed to have been a mandate to “protect civilians”. Indeed, it is evidence of massive war crimes committed by NATO.

Yet the New York Times, far from displaying truthful, investigative journalism, appears to be concealing the real extent of the war crimes committed by NATO.

The NYT admits that its figures for civilian casualties are not “complete accounting”. It goes on: “Survivors and doctors working for the anti-Qaddafi interim authorities point to dozens more civilians wounded in these and other strikes, and they referred reporters to other sites... “because the Times did not examine sites in several cities and towns where the air campaign was active, the casualty estimate could be low.”

The question is: why did the New York Times not follow up on leads that point to more accurate and much greater accounting of the total number of the civilian death toll caused by NATO? The answer is obvious: because it would show the kind of massive casualties deduced above, the criminality of NATO governments and the complicity of Western mainstream media, such as the New York Times itself, in endorsing this military operation under the fraudulent pretext of R2P (responsibility to protect).

So, why would the NYT now shed partial light on the criminal nature of NATO’s Libyan bloodbath? Possibly, there are reasons of vanity. The ‘paper of record’ no doubt salves its own conscience and that of its readers in appearing to “tell some harsh truths”. And for the sake of historical record, the NYT can now produce citations that suggest it did not behave as an abject mouthpiece for Western government militarism in Libya.

But there is another insidious effect from the NYT’s “investigation” into NATO’s civilian deaths in Libya. Its latest reporting is replete with bias towards the notion that the evidence is not one of criminal atrocities, but rather one of “unintended mistakes” committed by NATO that resulted in “collateral damage”.

“There are indications that [NATO] took many steps to avoid harming civilians,” says the NYT report... “operations were devised and supervised with exceptional care”. Repeatedly, the paper refers to “collateral deaths” “fatal mistakes” “mistaken attacks” “errant strikes” “lethal accidents” “unintended victims”.

Under the guise of “boldly telling the truth” the NYT – supposedly one of the stalwarts of independent Western journalism – ends up apologizing for and concealing mass murder committed by the governments of the US, Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, along with Persian Gulf allies Qatar and United Arab Emirates.

Other troubling questions remain about the standard of NYT journalism, or should we say propaganda. Some of the civilian casualties that the paper investigates two months after the ending of the NATO bombing campaign were not reported by the NYT at the time of the incidents. One incident involved a mother and two young sons who were killed when NATO warplanes hit their home in Zlitan on 4 August. Another incident was that of a NATO strike on a seven-storey apartment block in Surt on 16 September killing at least one woman, who died after both her arms were severed in the blast. Searches in the NYT archives by Global Research found no reports pertaining to these atrocities. The NYT had staff based in Libya during the NATO bombardment. Why were such incidents not investigated at the time? Or maybe they were, but just not disclosed?

One of the case studies highlighted by the latest NYT article is the NATO bombing of a food warehouse in Surman on 30 March. Again, there appear to be no reports in the NYT at around the time of the attack. Yet in the latest investigation published on 17 December, the NYT refers to satellite imagery of the attack at Surman that is dated 23 August. Why did the New York Times not report this criminal bombing of a food warehouse until nearly nine months after the incident and four months after the date of the satellite evidence?

More disturbing is indication that the New York Times deliberately obfuscated the magnitude of a second NATO war crime near the town of Zlitan, east of Tripoli. On 8 August, Agence France Presse and various non-Western media reported the deaths of up to 85 civilians after NATO warplanes repeatedly attacked several farmhouses. Global Research published images at the time that clearly showed that the targets were civilian homes, contradicting NATO claims that the sites were military facilities.

On 9 August, the NYT ran this short 175-word report from Reuters under the headline: *Libya Says Civilians Died in Strike* [3].

ZLITAN, Libya (Reuters) — Libyan officials said Tuesday that dozens of civilians had been killed in a NATO strike on a cluster of farmhouses east of the capital, Tripoli, but the alliance said it had hit a legitimate military target.

A spokesman for Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi’s government who took foreign reporters to the site said 85 people had been killed when missiles struck farm compounds in the village of Majar, about 90 miles east of Tripoli. He said 33 children, 32 women and 20 men had been killed.

Standing on a pile of rubble, the spokesman, Moussa Ibrahim, said: “This is a crime beyond imagination. Everything about this place is civilian.”

There was no evidence of weapons at the farmhouses, but there were no bodies there,

either. Nor was there blood.

At a news conference in Brussels, a NATO military spokesman said the target of the strikes was a military staging area that was being used to support government attacks on civilians. "This was a legitimate target," said the spokesman, Col. Roland Lavoie."

Note that the NYT gives prominence to NATO justification for the attack even though there was credible evidence from eyewitnesses, doctors and other media outlets that a serious war crime had been committed. Note too that the NYT uses a Reuters dispatch. Why wasn't a member of its own staff sent to report? Note too that the above report highlights the official Libyan source of information on the casualties, instead of an abundant number of eyewitnesses and medics reported by other media, which has the effect of implying that the information is less than credible. Finally, why did the NYT not follow up this horrific incident in the subsequent days, dispatching its own staff to the scene?

As it turns out, the latest NYT investigation published on 17 December confirms that the village of Majar, near Zlitan, did witness an atrocity in which dozens of civilians were killed by NATO bombers on 8 August. This is corroborated by surgeons and medics who treated the victims, as well as by death certificates. The Times puts the death toll at 35, less than the 58-85 reported elsewhere. But regardless of the exact figure, this is clearly an atrocity, a war crime. But the Times does not call it by name. Instead, even in its "investigative follow-up" – four months after the deadly attack – the NYT still reiterates NATO claims that the homes were a "military staging area". It reports: "NATO told the New York Times it had reviewed the strikes and that claims of civilians casualties were not corroborated by 'available factual information'."

Time and again the NYT does not challenge the NATO propaganda line, even in its supposed hard-hitting investigation, merely leaving NATO's claims as a final ambiguous punctuation on the matter.

It is hard not to conclude that if the NYT had really carried out its supposed journalistic mission of telling the truth at the time of such atrocities in Libya, then NATO's criminal war on Libya would not have had the crucial media cover/obfuscation that allowed the war to be waged. The atrocity at Zlitan came at a pivotal time in NATO's campaign to overthrow Gaddafi. It paved the way for NATO's proxies on the ground to make the final assault on Tripoli.

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NOTES

[1]

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/world/africa/scores-of-unintended-casualties-in-nato-war-in-libya.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=tha2>

[2] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=25966>

[3]

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/10/world/africa/10libya.html?scp=2&sq=reuters+libya&st=nyt>

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