

NATO Assault on Sirte Inflicts More Libyan Civilian Casualties

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The coastal Libyan city of Sirte is under ferocious bombardment from NATO in the air, and militia fighters aligned with the National Transitional Council (NTC) on the ground. Tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped in the area, and are being subjected to indiscriminate rocket, mortar and missile attacks. The military operation has also involved a prolonged blockade—denying residents access to basic supplies, including food, water, medicine and fuel—that has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis.

Numerous reports have emerged from civilians who have managed to flee Sirte in recent days about NATO bombs destroying homes and other civilian buildings and infrastructure.

Ashiq Hussein, an immigrant Pakistani electrician who escaped with 11 of his family members, told AFP: “NATO struck one big building, Imarat Tamim, two days ago, with 12 or 13 bombs. The whole building with nearly 600 flats is razed to the ground now... Two of my neighbours died yesterday in a NATO bomb which hit their home. Maybe they have information that on rooftops there were Gaddafi men... But a lot of civilian buildings were getting hit. Also the incoming shells from NTC forces were hitting civilian homes.”

NATO war planes are conducting continual operations in the air above Sirte, carrying out reconnaissance and bombing operations and also dropping leaflets demanding that civilians leave the city and pro-Gaddafi fighters surrender. According to official figures released in Brussels, 78 strike sorties were carried out last Saturday and Sunday, with all but two of the confirmed “key hits” occurring in Sirte.

The American, British and French governments spearheading the bombardment are guilty of war crimes. What is unfolding in Sirte has again put paid to the “humanitarian” pretext for the regime change campaign in Libya that was driven by the predatory economic and geo-strategic calculations of the US and European powers. NATO figures now make little pretence that their operation has anything to do with “saving lives” in Libya. The people of Sirte are being subjected to a collective punishment for their hostility toward NATO and the NTC, with the brutal military operation serving as a warning to people throughout Libya and the region against any resistance to the agenda being advanced by Washington, London and Paris.

Around 100,000 people live in Sirte, located about halfway between the Libyan capital of Tripoli and the eastern city of Benghazi. It remains unclear how many are left, but the number is certainly in the tens of thousands. The situation there is already critical. The population has not had access to running water and a regular electricity supply since August. Child malnutrition has been reported and there are increasing incidents of

sanitation-related diseases, including diarrhoea.

Dr Siraj Assouri, who was in Sirte last weekend, told the *Guardian* that basic medical supplies had run out and people were resorting to drinking contaminated water to survive. "There is no medicine for heart disease or blood pressure, or baby milk or nappies," he explained. "There is very little water that is drinkable. The water is contaminated with waste oil."

Reuters interviewed Al-Sadiq, who said he had run the dialysis unit at Sirte's main hospital. He explained: "Doctors start operating, then the power goes. They have a few litres of fuel for the generators, then the lights go out when they operate. I saw a child of 14 die on the operating table because the power went out during the operation."

Mohammed Shnaq, a biochemist who fled the hospital on Sunday, added: "It's a catastrophe. Patients are dying every day for need of oxygen."

NTC gunmen enforcing the siege of Sirte have deliberately created the humanitarian crisis by refusing to allow supplies into the city. A group of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers entered Sirte on Saturday to deliver body bags and war wounded kits, but was unable to enter the hospital because it came under fire from the NTC.

ICRC team leader Hichem Khadhraoui told AFP: "Several rockets landed within the hospital buildings while we were there. We saw a lot of indiscriminate fire. I don't know where it was coming from." Khadhraoui added that his team members "were surprised" by the attack, because they had "contacted all parties to say we were going in."

The incident appears to have been another premeditated war crime carried out by NTC forces. Al Jazeera reported that "NTC fighters are unhappy with the ICRC for delivering supplies to the town rather than evacuating wounded people and searching for disappeared residents."

On Saturday, NTC chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil announced a two-day "humanitarian" ceasefire, supposedly to allow more civilians to evacuate. Yet the attack on Sirte's hospital occurred during this so-called ceasefire, while journalists on the city's outskirts reported no let up in the militias' indiscriminate mortar and rocket fire. On Saturday, according to AFP, two children and two adults were killed when their vehicle, which was leaving Sirte, was hit by a rocket, apparently fired by NTC militia. The children "were torn to pieces," Dr Ahmed Abu Oud, a field medic on the western side of Sirte, said. "They collected the body parts in bags."

The declared "ceasefire"—which was accepted as good coin by much of the US and European media—was clearly motivated by propaganda considerations. NATO and NTC forces are preparing their alibis for the civilian killings for which they will be responsible in the final offensive on Sirte. Having supposedly given time for civilians to flee, all those left in the city will be regarded as legitimate targets by NTC fighters.

A similar campaign was waged in the lead up to the US assault of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in November-December 2004. After demanding that civilians flee, the commanders of the 10,000 US troops and marines who invaded the city regarded everyone still there, especially men, as justifiable targets. The entire urban centre became a free-fire zone, while civilian buildings were systematically levelled as a means of killing snipers and other anti-

occupation fighters. Similarly in Sirte, snipers have played an important role in pushing TNC militia out of the city centre.

Those left in Sirte include the most vulnerable layers of the population. One fleeing resident told the BBC that “those left behind were either too badly injured to leave, or lacked cars and petrol.” Petrol reportedly costs 600 dinars, or about \$450, for 20 litres. Mohammed Dahab, a 30-year-old engineer who was born in Sudan but has lived in Sirte since he was 5, told *Spiegel Online*: “The only ones left are the poor, including many African foreigners.”

The African immigrant and dark-skinned Libyan community in Sirte has been swollen by a recent influx of refugees from neighbouring Tawargha. The town of about 10,000 people was entirely depopulated by NTC militiamen who went on a racist rampage after they captured it in August.

Fears among Sirte residents of similar reprisal attacks are well-founded. When NTC fighters fought their way into the Sirte district of Bouhadi yesterday, a Reuters correspondent reported that they set a house on fire belonging to someone allegedly close to Gaddafi. In other houses, the reporter added: “Some helped themselves to belongings. NTC pickup trucks drove from the area loaded with carpets, clothes and furniture. One NTC vehicle had a table football game in the back.

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