

US Escalates Military Onslaught Against Libya

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, the operations commander of the US and European forces attacking Libya, said Tuesday afternoon that he was “considering all options” in expanding the war against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

The United States and Britain launched another two dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles against targets along the Libyan coast, including several in Tripoli, the capital city. France said its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle was joining the operation Tuesday, the first such vessel to be deployed in the war zone. Belgian and Spanish warplanes have begun air patrols over Libya, joining the US, Britain, France and the Netherlands.

Locklear, who directs all US naval forces in Europe and Africa, cited the March 18 speech by President Obama, which demanded that “the forces of Gaddafi have to stop advancing on Benghazi, they have to pull back from Zawiyah, Ajdabiya, Misurata.”

“They have not done that,” the admiral said. “We basically have forced him out of Benghazi. In the other three places, they have not complied with the direction from our president. So when I take a look at ... my mission here, I apply that type of standard to operations that are occurring.”

“My intelligence tells me that there are Gaddafi forces in Misurata,” Locklear continued. “They are conducting attacks against civilians in Misurata and in violation of the Security Council resolution. I’m not going to talk about future operations, but I am aware of it, and we are considering all options.”

“As the capabilities of the coalition grow,” Locklear explained, “we’ll be able to provide more support, more missions to what you would call ground forces [and] what I would call time-sensitive targeting, where we’re looking at the battle space as it changes, looking at the disposition of Gaddafi’s forces that are not complying with the UN Security Council resolution, and we’ll be able to have more of an effect. ... That’s how I would characterize the coming hours and days.”

These remarks strongly suggest that the focus of the bombing campaign by the US, Britain, France and other powers will shift from targeting air defense systems and command and control facilities to the annihilation of large numbers of ground troops loyal to the Gaddafi regime.

The reference to “time-sensitive targeting” is particularly revealing, since it inevitably requires the closest collaboration with forces on the ground, either rebel troops, with the US and allied warplanes used for tactical support, or US, British and French special ops and intelligence agents sent into the country to serve as spotters.

A report in the *New York Times* Tuesday indicated that this tactical collaboration is already in effect. "United States military commanders repeated throughout the day that they were not communicating with Libyan rebels, even as a spokesman for the rebel military, Khaled El-Sayeh, asserted that rebel officers had been providing the allies with coordinates for their air strikes," the newspaper reported. "We give them the coordinates, and we give them the location that needs to be bombed," Sayeh told the *Times*.

This tactical shift will mean an enormous increase in casualties among both Libyan soldiers and civilians, who are closely intermingled in all the cities being contested between the Gaddafi regime and the rebel forces.

The first phase of the aerial assault is largely completed, the US admiral said, as he described what remains of Libya's air force and anti-aircraft systems as "largely ineffective." The US, Britain and France are extending the no-fly zone steadily westward from Benghazi towards the capital.

Locklear's superior, General Carter Ham, head of the US Africa Command, said total air strikes against Libya rose from 60 on Sunday to 80 on Monday, and of these, "well over half" were flown by non-US aircraft, principally British and French.

Locklear said that a US F-15 fighter that crashed Monday night had not been shot down, but suffered a mechanical failure. He confirmed that the two airmen had been retrieved, one by US forces and one by Libyan rebels—an indication of the close coordination of the US and European operations with the anti-Gaddafi forces.

At the same time, he refused to comment on a British press report that a Marine Osprey aircraft engaged in the rescue effort had opened fire on villagers approaching one of the downed pilots, killing five of them.

This is the first reported massacre of Libyan civilians by the imperialist forces supposedly coming to save them from death at the hands of Gaddafi. It will not be the last.

Heavy fighting was reported Tuesday in Misurata, Libya's third-largest city, 200 kilometers (125 miles) east of Tripoli, the only major city in the western half of the country still in rebel hands. Libyan army tanks moved into the city last week but neither side appears to be in effective control. At least 40 people were killed in the city Monday, according to press reports.

There was also an attempt by pro-Gaddafi forces to seize the rebel-held town of Zintan, near the Tunisian border.

Rebel forces remain largely on the defensive. They did not resume their effort to recapture Ajdabiyah, taken by Gaddafi's troops during their offensive last week. Press reports Monday described rebel fighters rushing pell mell into the city, expecting little resistance, only to face heavy tank and missile fire. The rebels retreated in considerable disorder and remain camped well outside the city. Three nights of air strikes on the city have failed to dislodge the pro-government forces.

In an indication of a possible next stage in the imperialist intervention in Libya, NBC News broadcast a remarkable report from Benghazi, the rebel capital, in which correspondent Richard Engel said that the rebels were appealing for outside military advisers to help

remedy the defects in organization, discipline and logistics that were revealed during last week's near-collapse.

In what amounted to a public service announcement summoning Western mercenaries to Benghazi, Engel reported that the rebels, who control a significant portion of Libya's oil resources, were willing to "pay commercial rates" for the services of private military experts.

The aims of the imperialist intervention—the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and the seizure of Libya's oil resources—cannot be achieved without a direct, on-the-ground military presence. George Friedman of the political risk consultancy Stratfor, which has close ties to the US intelligence establishment, wrote in a particularly blunt analysis: "The long-term goal, unspoken but well understood, is regime change."

"The early days will go extremely well but will not define whether or not the war is successful," he maintained. "The test will come if a war designed to stop human suffering begins to inflict human suffering."

There is no doubt that Washington, London and Paris are resolved to kill as many thousands as required to accomplish their reactionary aims.

The scale of the air and missile strikes on Libya gives the lie to the "protecting civilians" mantra of the Obama administration and its allies. Press reports cited attacks on warehouses at the port of Tripoli as well as a naval facility east of the city, where Reuters quoted eyewitness accounts of "a massive explosion."

An *Al Jazeera* correspondent reported: "We could see an area of the port on fire, substantially on fire, two big blazes. We saw fire engines racing along the coastal road. This evening seems to have been about targeting seaborne military assets of Gaddafi's army..."

The targeting of the Libyan navy has nothing to do with protecting civilians, but is a key focus in the effort to revive the flagging military fortunes of the US-backed rebel forces. Gaddafi's small navy played an important tactical role in last week's offensive along the coast, allowing his troops to bypass rebel strongpoints and attack them from the rear.

While escalating the violence in Libya, the imperialist powers are engaged in an increasingly bitter struggle among themselves over control and direction of the anti-Gaddafi campaign. It was reported late Tuesday that the United States and France have reached agreement on the command structure for the war.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy appears to have prevailed in his insistence that NATO not be the forum for giving overall direction to the campaign. Instead, an ad hoc committee will be established representing only those countries contributing military forces.

This would include several non-NATO Arab countries, like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, if they send warplanes as promised, and it would exclude Germany, which abstained in last Thursday's vote on the UN Security Council resolution authorizing the attack on Libya.

Both Germany and Turkey, which has publicly criticized the conduct of the war, would have had an effective veto in the NATO command structure, which requires unanimity among the members of the US-led alliance.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé argued strenuously against making the war a NATO operation on the grounds that this would risk losing the support of the Arab League as well as many African countries.

The controversy dominated and largely overshadowed President Obama's trip to Latin America, in the course of which he was compelled to phone the Emir of Qatar to lobby for his support, as well as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

There was increasing criticism of the scale of the attack on Libya from countries in Asia and Africa. Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said in a speech to parliament that "no external powers" should interfere in Libya. "Nobody, not a couple of countries, can take that decision to change a particular regime," he said.

The UN Security Council rejected a request from Libya for an emergency meeting on the military aggression by the US-led coalition. The council will hold a session Thursday to receive a briefing on the war by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

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