

US-NATO Bombings Kill Civilians in Tripoli

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US-NATO air strikes on Tripoli and other Libyan cities have claimed growing numbers of civilian victims, according to the Vatican's top representative in the Libyan capital.

The report represents a severe blow to the attempts by Washington and its NATO allies, backed by the overwhelming majority of the Western media, to dismiss the Libyan government's claims of civilian casualties as "propaganda" and portray the continuous air raids as a "humanitarian" defense of the population.

"The so-called humanitarian air raids have taken the lives of dozens of civilians in various areas of Tripoli," Bishop Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, the Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli told Agenzia Fides, the Vatican news service.

"Of particular concern, in the district of Buslim, a building collapsed because of the bombing killing 40 people," he said "Yesterday I reported that the bombing had affected some hospitals, albeit indirectly. I can now confirm that one of these hospitals is in Misda," a town about 110 miles south of Tripoli.

The Euronews television channel reported that a bombing raid on an ammunition dump in Misda had caused damage to the hospital and nearby homes, wounding at least 13 civilians.

In an interview with Euronews, Bishop Martinelli said that the scores of casualties had been "confirmed to me by people who have lost loved ones because of these bombings."

He cited another incident in which an air strike hit a munitions warehouse located in close proximity to a civilian neighborhood. "This building was exploding for three, four hours," he said, claiming more victims.

"If it is true that the bombings appear to be very targeted," Martrinelli told the Fides news agency, "it is also true that they are hitting military targets which are in the midst of civilian neighborhoods, thus the local people are also affected."

The bishop added: "The situation in Tripoli is becoming more difficult every day. The fuel shortage has worsened, as evidenced by the queues of cars at petrol stations." Describing the military conflict as an "impasse", he urged a "diplomatic solution...to end the bloodshed between Libyans, giving Gaddafi a dignified way out."

NATO, which formally assumed command of the US-led war against Libya Thursday, said it was investigating the reported casualties. Lt. Gen. Charles Bouchard, the Canadian officer heading the NATO command in Libya, described the bishop's account as a "news report" and insisted that NATO was operating under "very strict rules of engagement" and "within

the legal mandate of our United Nations mandate.” Echoing similar statements issued by the NATO command in response to the continuous killing of civilians in Afghanistan, he added, “I appreciate the source of this report, but it is worth noting that I take every one of those issues seriously.”

In a separate incident, the Associated Press interviewed the family of an 18-month-old toddler, Sirajuddin al-Sweisi, who was killed when an ammunition dump near their home in the village of Khorum, about 55 miles south of Tripoli, was attacked by US-NATO warplanes.

The young boy’s mother said that their house was rocked by the blast at about six in the morning, with debris piercing the wall of the family’s home. She found her son, who was sleeping, with a piece of hot metal embedded into the side of his face.

“His blood was streaming down my arm,” she said weeping. “He was crying out, ‘Mama, Mama’, reaching out with his hand to me.”

The family rushed him to the hospital where he was treated for burns and broken bones, but he died the same night.

Neighbors said that the explosions caused by the air raid injured a number of other people and damaged houses in the area.

Washington and its allies have claimed legitimacy for their imperialist assault on Libya by invoking United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorizes “all necessary measures” to protect civilians from attack. It has become increasingly evident that these “measures” include the slaughter of the very civilians that are supposedly being protected.

Reports of civilian casualties have drawn criticism of the US-NATO operation from a number of countries.

China, which together with Russia, India, Brazil and Germany, abstained on the UN resolution authorizing a no-fly zone appealed Wednesday for a ceasefire. During a meeting with his French counterpart President Nicolas Sarkozy, one of the most vociferous advocates of military action to overthrow Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Chinese President Hu Jintao urged the world to “give peace a chance.”

“The aim of the UN’s resolution is to stop violence and protect civilians,” Chinese state television quoted Hu as saying in his meeting with Sarkozy. “If the military action brings disaster to innocent civilians and creates a bigger humanitarian crisis, that would violate the original intention of the Security Council resolution.”

The crisis in Libya has seen some \$18.8 billion worth of Chinese investments in Libya placed on hold and the cutoff of Libyan oil exports to China, its largest Asian customer.

South Africa, which as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council voted in favor of the resolution, similarly called for a ceasefire and “restraint” by all sides. “As South Africa we say no to the killing of civilians, no to the regime change doctrine and no to foreign occupation of Libya or any other sovereign state,” a statement issued by the South African cabinet Thursday read.

Russia, which had also begun developing significant economic and geostrategic interests in

Libya, also called for a ceasefire and immediate talks between the Gaddafi regime and the “rebels”. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at a press conference in Moscow Wednesday condemned statements by US, British and French officials that arming the “rebels” was being considered. The UN resolution, Lavrov said, was intended “to protect the population and not to arm it.”

On Thursday, the Russian state-owned television channel Rossiya 1 carried a report on the repatriation of hundreds of Russian citizens who were evacuated from Libya and brought back to Moscow on an Emergencies Ministry aircraft from Tunisia.

“The coalition bombed depots, and the shells flew off the depots in all directions, and they hit civilian buildings, houses,” Lyubov Shalyeva, one of the evacuees told Rossiya 1.

The report cited the testimony of Russian obstetrician Andrey Novseltsev and his wife who worked in a hospital Misratah, where “dozens of people came every day, and two days ago a bomb fell right next to them during an operation.”

“I don’t even know how I ended up on the ground,” Novoseltsev said. “We told our child that it was fireworks; she didn’t know what was going on. Well, now we know what Tomahawks are.”

The Rossiya 1 correspondent reported that the Russian workers had drafted a statement before leaving Libya denouncing the US-NATO attack on the country.

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