The debate on “arming the rebels”

Washington prepares to escalate the war in Libya

By Bill Van Auken

The ongoing public debate in Washington and the American media on “arming the rebels” in Libya points to a dramatic escalation of the US-led war.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, followed by their British counterparts, Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague, have spoken in almost identical terms over the past two weeks, insisting in response to questions about arming the anti-Gaddafi forces that they were “not ruling it out.”

The debate has intensified in the face of a growing debate for the US-led intervention. Armed anti-Gaddafi forces have carried out a head-long retreat after confronting resistance from both military forces loyal to the government in Tripoli and armed civilians hostile to the US-backed opposition. According to reports from Libya, they have been pushed back to the strategic highway junction town of Ajdabiya, the site of some of the heaviest US-NA TO bombing.

The earlier advance of some 200 miles along the Mediterranean coast, which was celebrated by Western governments and media, was due entirely to air strikes carried out by US and NATO warplanes, which effectively acted as the air force of the so-called “rebels.”

Forces supporting the Gaddafi regime beat a tactical retreat rather than be wiped out from the air. After a week of bombing and missile attacks, last weekend the Pentagon sent in low-flying, heavily armed AC-130 gunships and A10 attack planes, aircraft that have been used to deadly effect in close-air support for US troops from the Vietnam War to the Fallujah massacre in Iraq and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

The “rebels” advance essentially amounted to a drive-through, with the US-backed fighters encountering no opposition. “There wasn’t resistance,” Faraj Sheydani, one of the anti-Gaddafi fighters told the New York Times. “There was no one in front of us. There’s no fighting.”

This changed on Tuesday, when the US-backed insurgents approached the town of Sirte, Gaddafi’s birthplace. In the village of Bin Jawad, about 80 miles east of Sirte, according to a report by McClatchy Newspapers reporter Nancy Youssef, women were sent out on buses. “As soon as the women were out of harm’s way,” the article said, “the men began shooting at the rebels from their houses.”

On Wednesday, the rout continued, with the oil-producing towns of Ras Lanuf and Brega falling back under government control and the US-backed forces fleeing back to Ajdabiya. As Youssef reported, “Most [of the ‘rebels’] it turned out had no intention of fighting when it mattered.”

In an attempt to overcome the severe limitations of this force, Washington has already sent in operatives tasked with organizing the “rebels” into an armed unit capable of waging civil war. As the New York Times reported on Wednesday, the Central Intelligence Agency has deployed “clandestine operatives into Libya to gather intelligence for military airstrikes and make contacts with rebels.”

In addition, the Times reported, citing British officials, “dozens of British special forces and MI6 intelligence officers are working inside Libya.”

ABC News, meanwhile, reported that President Obama Wednesday signed a secret presidential finding “authorizing covert operations to aid the effort in Libya.”

“The presidential finding discusses a number of ways to help the opposition to Muammar Gaddafi, authorizing some assistance now and setting up a legal framework for more robust activities in the future,” the network reports.

It is in this context that the drumbeat for “arming the rebels” has begun. The phrase is meant to conceal the fact that any attempt to provide significant weaponry to the disorganized forces based in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi would entail the deployment of US “trainers,” “advisors” and special forces units, making a mockery of the pledge made Monday night by Obama that he would “not put ground troops into Libya.”

As the Times reported, citing unnamed administration officials, “supplying arms would further entangle the United States in a drawn-out civil war, because the rebels would need to be trained to use any weapons, even relatively simple rifles and shoulder-fired anti-armor weapons.”

The proposal to provide arms, it adds, “carries echoes of previous American efforts to arm rebels, in Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and elsewhere, many of which backfired.”

All of the examples given by the Times were counterrevolutionary operations mounted by the CIA. In Angola, the agency poured in arms, money, advisors and South African troops to back the UNITA movement of Jonas Savimbi, fueling a civil war that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands.

In Nicaragua, the CIA directed the infamous contra mercenaries in a terror war against the population, killing more than 40,000 people, mostly civilians. And in Afghanistan, the CIA armed and funded the Islamic mujahideen against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in a war that left more than a million Afghans dead.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the armed conflict in Libya is not a “revolution,” a “pro-democracy movement” or a “humanitarian intervention, but rather a similar operation run by the CIA and allied intelligence agencies. Its aim is not to liberate the Libyan people, but rather to install a more pliant regime in Tripoli that will guarantee US control of oil production in that country and the wider region.

The discussion on arming the anti-Gaddafi forces is dominated by the same lies and duplicity that have characterized the US intervention from its outset.

Officially, NATO’s is not contemplating such action. NATO’s secretary general, the right-wing Danish politician Anders Fogh Rasmussen, insisted in an interview with CNN: “The UN mandate authorizes the enforcement of an arms embargo. We are not in Libya to arm people, but to protect people.”

Rasmussen’s statement is meant to placate a number of NATO members, including Turkey, Germany and Italy, which have publicly opposed any move to arm the forces in Benghazi and voiced reservations about the extent of the US-led bombing campaign. The Obama administration has formally transferred command of the Libyan operation to NATO, which the US dominates politically and militarily, creating a similar structure to the one that exists in Afghanistan.

US and British officials have taken the opposite position, insisting that the March 17 UN resolution authorizing “all necessary means” to protect civilians somehow abrogates a Feb.