

# US-NATO warplanes strike Libyan ground forces

By Bill Van Auken

**US and NATO warplanes turned their firepower Wednesday against ground forces loyal to the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The change in tactics is a further demonstration that the war in Libya is driven not by humanitarian concerns, but rather the imperialist aims of dominating the country and seizing its oil wealth.**

The air strikes on the fifth day of the war targeted pro-government forces battling for control of the coastal city of Misrata, about 130 miles east of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and Ajdabiya, the strategic highway

junction just 100 miles south of Benghazi, the stronghold of the anti-Gaddafi insurgency.

The British *Guardian* reported Wednesday: "Nearly 12 hours of allied air strikes have virtually wiped out Muammar Gaddafi's forces that were attacking the rebel-held town of Misrata." It quoted residents of the town as saying the attacks, which began shortly after midnight, continued until 11:30 Wednesday morning. A former hospital used as a headquarters for the military force was almost destroyed by the bombing. Attacks were also carried out against the nearby air force academy and airport.

Bombing of sites in the capital has also continued, with

new explosions heard in Tripoli Wednesday night. The government reports that the attacks have killed and wounded civilians.

Speaking via audio link to Pentagon reporters from the USS Mount Whitney, the flagship for US naval forces in the Mediterranean, Rear Adm. Gerard Hueber, the chief of staff of the US-led task force, said: "We are interdicting and putting pressure on Gaddafi's ground forces that are attacking civilian populations in cities." He said the attacks would continue so long as pro-government forces continued to contest control of Ajdabiya and Misrata.

"We have no indication that the Gaddafi forces are adhering

to the UN Security [Council] resolution 1973, and that is why we continue to pressurize those forces." Hueber said.

Meanwhile, a British air force commander, Air Vice Marshal Greg Bagwell, told reporters at a NATO base in southern Italy that the Libyan air force had been destroyed "as a fighting force" and NATO aircraft were able to operate with "near impunity" over the entire country.

According to NATO officials, by Wednesday US, British and French warplanes had flown 300 sorties against Libyan targets and the country had been struck by more than 162 Tomahawk cruise missiles, virtually all of them fired from US warships. The number of sorties flown during the 24-hour period ending at noon on Wednesday reached 97.

The inevitable byproduct of these attacks on ground troops fighting in urban areas will be the slaughter of civilians hit by US, British and French bombs and missiles.

As the attacks have intensified, the operation has drawn increasing international criticism. After meeting with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Moscow, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov called for an immediate ceasefire and accused the US-led forces of killing civilians with their bombing campaign.

The civilian deaths, he said, "shouldn't have been let to happen and we informed our US counterparts of our opposition." Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, after talks with Gates, accused the US-led forces of carrying out "indiscriminate" air strikes.

China similarly called for a ceasefire. "The UN resolution on the no-fly zone over Libya aimed to protect civilians," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters. "We oppose abuse of force causing more civilian casualties." Both Russia and China abstained on the vote for the UN resolution, refusing to exercise their veto on the Security Council.

Turkey's government, which has provided warships for a blockade of the Libyan coast and called for Gaddafi to step down, also criticized the attack, undoubtedly in an attempt to assuage mass opposition among the Turkish people. Hinting at the real motivation behind the war, Turkish President Abdullah Gul told reporters: "The issue is essentially about peoples' freedom and ending oppression... but unfortunately it is obvious that some countries are driven by oppor-

tunism. Some who until yesterday were closest to the dictators and sought to take advantage of them... display an excessive behavior today and raise suspicions of secret intentions."

Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, warned Tuesday that "we have seen in the past that such operations... increase loss of life, turn into occupation and seriously harm the countries' unity."

Algeria, which borders on Libya and is part of the Arab League, whose resolution calling for a no-fly zone is incessantly cited as justification for the aggression, called the attacks "disproportionate."

As for Arab support, which the US and its allies have maintained is critical for the Libyan intervention, it has so far been invisible. Qatar, the tiny sheikhdom which is the sole Arab League member to offer its services, is expected to send a total of three aircraft for the no-fly zone sometime next week.

Statements made by both President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Gates on the Libyan intervention made it clear that as far as Washington is concerned the "humanitarian" aims of the war cannot be realized outside of regime change in Tripoli and the installation of a puppet government under US-NATO tutelage, something that is in no way broached in the UN resolution.

Speaking in San Salvador on the last leg of his Latin American tour, Obama claimed that the US-British-French intervention had "averted immediate tragedy," based on the claim that Gaddafi's forces were about to carry out a massacre in the city of Benghazi, which the media, in promoting the war, likened to the genocidal slaughter in Rwanda. While the Gaddafi regime has no doubt been brutal in its repression, there is no evidence of such massacres in the cities which it has regained from insurgent control.

Obama continued, declaring: "As long as Gaddafi remains in power—unless he changes his approach and provides the Libyan people the opportunity to express themselves freely and there are significant reforms by the Libyan government, and he steps down—there's still going to be a potential threat to the Libyan people."

The UN resolution sanctions military action to halt the "threat" of attacks on civilians. Ergo, according to Obama and his imperialist counterparts, they have a green light to oust Gaddafi and do as they wish with Libya.

Claiming that Washington would cede the leadership of the war, which is broadly opposed by the American people, to the European powers, Obama warned that "Gaddafi may try to hunker down and wait it out even in the face of a no-fly zone, even though his

forces have been degraded." The US would continue using both "military tools" and "international sanctions" to force his ouster, Obama said.

Secretary of Defense Gates, speaking in Cairo, stressed that the duration of the war on Libya is open-ended. "The no-fly zone is not time-limited by the Security Council resolution," he said. "So I think that there is no current time line in terms of when it might end."

Gates continued: "I think we will be assessing this as we go along in terms of when his [Gaddafi's] capabilities to do things to his people have been eliminated. But I think no one was under any illusions that this would be an operation that would last one week, or two weeks, or three weeks."

Eliminating a government's "capabilities" to do anything to its own people effectively means destroying its military and security forces and overthrowing it.

Gates's presence in Cairo is itself highly revealing about the character of the imperialist intervention in Libya. He is the second high-ranking US official to visit the Egyptian capital in the wake of last month's ouster of the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak as a result of a mass uprising of the Egyptian people. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held talks with top Egyptian military and civilian officials just last week.

Gates voiced his satisfaction with the policies of the post-Mubarak military regime and stressed the need to "advance stability" based upon "the longstanding relationship between the United States military and the Egyptian military and the constructive role the Egyptian military has played in the events of the past couple of months."

Gates arrived in Cairo on the same day that the military-controlled government issued a decree outlawing all protests, demonstrations, strikes or sit-ins that disrupt private or state-owned businesses or in any way affect the country's economy. The decree provides for stiff criminal penalties for anyone calling for such actions.

The Pentagon chief also said he was discussing the military operations in Libya with Egyptian officials, including Field Marshal Tantawi, the head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

There can be little doubt that the relationship between the situation within Egypt and the war in Libya has been at the center of these discussions. Washington will provide full support for the counterrevolutionary repression being prepared by the military regime in Cairo, while the Egyptian military, which is reportedly already supplying arms to the anti-Gaddafi forces, will play a more direct role in aiding the imperialist conquest of Libya.

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Republic of Namibia

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