

# Air strikes escalate, stalemate deepens in fighting around Libyan cities

By Patrick Martin  
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Air strikes by French, British and American warplanes continued to expand in Libya Thursday, but despite the massive firepower deployed by the imperialist powers against the forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi, anti-Gaddafi rebels remained stalemated in the ground warfare.

The air strikes were supplemented by more than a dozen cruise missiles, launched by US warships in the Mediterranean Sea, each of them delivering a warhead of as much as 2,000 pounds.

French fighter jets staged the most far-reaching raids, hitting at least two bases deep inside Libya, and well beyond the coastal region on which the US and its European co-belligerents have imposed a no-fly zone.

Press reports said the town of Sabha, 385 miles (620 kilometers) south of Tripoli, in the Sahara Desert, was the target of one of the French raids, while the other hit what Libyan officials called “the military compound at Juffra,” another desert town closer to the capital.

The raid on Sabha was apparently aimed at forestalling reinforcement of Gaddafi’s troops by Tuareg tribesmen coming north from neighboring Mali, who have frequently fought in military campaigns launched with Libyan support in Niger and Chad.

French fighters also shot down a Libyan air force plane as it was returning to the air base outside Misurata, scene of some of the bloodiest ground fighting in the civil war.

NATO warships announced a full-fledged blockade of Libya, to take effect Thursday, for the purpose of blocking any arms shipments to the Gaddafi regime. The Italian admiral in charge of the operation has ordered his forces to open fire on ships that refused to submit to the blockade. “If they should find resistance, the use of force is necessary,” he said.

Despite the intensifying air bombardment, the Gaddafi regime maintained its siege of Misurata, Libya’s third-largest city, and anti-Gaddafi rebels made no progress in efforts to retake Ajdabiya, a critical crossroads city that blocks the way to the main oil production facilities, currently in Gaddafi’s hands.

Al Jazeera reported that fighting overnight Wednesday and into Thursday had left 14 dead and 23 injured in Misurata, while other press reports gave the death total as much higher,

well over 100.

“The rebels are calling for a hospital ship to be sent in, as they still control the port, and say that would save many lives, as they now have nowhere to take their injured,” the network reported. This would appear to be an effort to incite a direct clash in Misurata between the heavily armed forces of Gaddafi and US and European naval forces.

US and European air strikes forced the pro-government forces to pull back their tanks Wednesday from the center of the city, but they returned after dark and continued to shell rebel positions. Strike aircraft, according to a US military spokesman, “continue to look for opportunities to target regime ground-based mechanized forces and command-and-control facilities.”

A US military spokesman admitted that air attacks in the heavily populated city could cause extensive civilian deaths. “It’s an extremely complex and difficult environment,” said US Navy Rear Adm. Gerard Hueber, chief of staff for the US-European forces.

In Ajdabiya, which fell to Gaddafi’s forces during their offensive eastward along the coast last week, a small rebel force of several hundred men failed to make a dent in the city’s defenses Thursday. Fawzi Hamid, a 33-year-old rebel fighter, told Associated Press, “The weapons they have are heavy weapons, and what we have are light weapons. The Gaddafi forces are more powerful than us, so we are depending on airstrikes.”

Eric Westervelt, a correspondent for the US-based National Public Radio, visited the rebel front lines near Ajdabiya and reported, “They were actually pushed back a little by pro-Gadhafi forces. There was fighting around the port area of Zwitina, a strategic oil port just north of Ajdabiya. So they’ve actually lost ground in the last 24 hours.”

There was heavy bombing around Tripoli, the capital city. Libyan state television showed pictures of blackened and mangled bodies of those killed in those attacks. Officials said more than 100 civilians have died in the air strikes.

The official JANA news agency said, “Military and civilian sites from Tripoli to Tajura continue to be the target of raids by the aggressive and colonialist crusade.” Tajura is some 30 miles east of the city.

Two reports in the *Los Angeles Times* Thursday gave a glimpse of the real character of the war in the east, and the nature of the US-backed rebel forces. One report detailed the close collaboration between rebel fighters on the ground and the US and European air patrols, despite the claims by the US military that there is no such coordination.

“Leaders of the opposition national council in rebel-controlled eastern Libya say they are making regular, secure contacts with allied military representatives in Europe to help commanders identify targets for the US-led air assault,” the newspaper reported, citing a spokesman for the Provisional National Council in Benghazi, Ahmed Khalifa.

To avoid direct military-to-military contact, the information on targeting is transmitted over secure satellite telephones—supplied by the Pentagon—to civilian representatives of the rebels in Europe, especially France. These officials pass on the data to government officials of the coalition powers, who forward it to the military.

“There is communication between the Provisional National Council and UN assembled forces, and we work on letting them know what areas need to be bombarded,” Khalifa told the *Times* Wednesday, saying the contacts began over the weekend—i.e., as soon as the war began.

While denying communication from the rebels to the Pentagon, Rear Adm. Hueber confirmed communication the other way, saying, “We have told...the opposition forces how to maneuver.”

The *Times* quoted Jeffrey White, a longtime Defense Intelligence Agency official, now working at a Washington think tank, to the effect that US officials “are trying to maintain this fig-leaf cover that we’re not assisting their combat forces against the Libyans. But we’re clearly creating conditions in which they can operate better.”

The second *Los Angeles Times* report described the abuse and torture of African immigrants in Benghazi, many of whom are accused of being Gaddafi mercenaries or spies when they were simply working in construction and the oil industry. “For a month, gangs of young gunmen have roamed the city, rousting Libyan blacks and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa from their homes and holding them for interrogation,” the newspaper wrote.

The article gave an account of how “55 terrified detainees were paraded in front of a busload of international journalists,” a press tour that “featured some of the same restrictions placed on journalists taken on tours in Tripoli by the Gaddafi regime: no interviews and no close-up photographs of prisoners. The prisoners and detainees were hauled out of dank cells that stank of urine and rot...”

These are the “democrats” and “freedom fighters” whom the Obama administration and British and French imperialism have joined forces to support.

Meanwhile, infighting continues among the European powers and between Europe and the United States over how the

military operations will be organized and directed.

Despite the claims of the White House that it seeks to pull back and allow others to take the lead, an American army general is the overall commander, an American navy admiral runs day-to-day operations, and an American air force general directs the air attacks. Pentagon officials have told the press that the air force general will continue to run the air campaign, the most critical phase of the war, regardless of changes in the command structure.

Of the 175 air missions conducted on Tuesday and Wednesday, 65 percent were flown by US planes and 35 percent by European planes. Pentagon officials said that balance was reversed on Thursday, with the heavy deployment of French warplanes, joined by a first contingent from Norway, which operated under US command.

Italian defense minister Ignazio La Russa offered a naval flotilla including the aircraft carrier *Garibaldi* and three supporting warships, as well as a dozen more warplanes to reinforce the onslaught against the former Italian colony. He made the offer the same day that Germany announced it was withdrawing four warships deployed in NATO operations in the Mediterranean to avoid becoming engaged in the military conflict.

A bitter war of words erupted between two other NATO “allies,” France and Turkey, after the French interior minister Claude Guéant, declared that President Nicolas Sarkozy was “leading a crusade” to stop Gaddafi massacring Libyans.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has opposed the attack on Libya, blasted the use of “utterly inappropriate terms” such as “crusade.” He then made remarks that laid bare the imperialist appetites behind the US-European military intervention.

“I advise our western friends, when they look at this region, to see the hungry children, the suffering mothers, the poverty,” Erdogan said. “I wish they would not only see oil, gold mines or underground wealth.”

Turkish President Abdullah Gül followed suit, declaring that “The aim is not the liberation of the Libyan people. There are hidden agendas and different interests.”

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