

Mounting Libyan death toll from US-NATO bombings

By Barry Grey
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The death toll in Libya from US, French and British air strikes continues to mount and promises to rise sharply as the imperialist powers escalate their attacks on both military and civilian targets.

One day after the US deployed Predator drones armed with Hellfire missiles and NATO warned civilians to “distance themselves from Gaddafi regime forces and equipment,” Libyan state television reported that nine people were killed overnight in a NATO air attack on Sirte, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s hometown. The news bulletin of al-Jamahiriya said that some of those killed in the air strike were workers at the state water utility.

This followed a report Thursday that seven civilians were killed and 18 wounded in a NATO air raid against the southwestern Tripoli suburb of Khellat al-Ferjan late Wednesday night, and a further report that NATO warplanes struck the town of Bir al-Ghanam, about 30 miles southwest of the Libyan capital, killing four civilians.

The deployment of US missile-armed drones follows the announcement by Britain, France and Italy that all three former colonial powers in North Africa will send military “advisers” to aid the so-called rebel forces based in Benghazi and headed by the Transitional National Council. It also follows the open letter from US President Obama, British Prime Minister Cameron and French President Sarkozy declaring that the war in Libya will continue until Gaddafi is removed from power.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that Obama had authorized the use of the deadly drone aircraft on Thursday, claiming that their ability to strike targets with “precision” would enable US-NATO forces to destroy pro-Gaddafi military forces and artillery situated in populated urban areas, such as the fiercely contested western Libyan city of Misrata, with little impact on civilians.

With absolutely no public discussion or even the formality of a congressional debate, this escalation was launched the same day. Predator sorties were carried out but the drones were prevented by bad weather from firing their missiles. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Friday that two drones,

each equipped with Hellfire missiles, would be in Libyan airspace around the clock.

There is not even a pretense of democratic concern for public opinion. The *New York Times* Friday reported the results of a *New York Times*/CBS News poll showing a sharp rise in popular opposition to the war, now into its second month. The poll showed 45 percent disapproving Obama’s handling of the military intervention and 39 approving. A CBS poll in March showed 50 percent in support and 29 percent opposed.

The carnage caused by US drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen was underscored Friday by another attack in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, in which 25 were killed, including at least seven women and children. The Pakistani government has reported hundreds of deaths over the past several years from US drone attacks in the border regions, the overwhelming majority of them civilians.

The escalating death and destruction being meted out by the US and its allies in Libya further exposes the lies that were used to justify the launching of the war five weeks ago. An intervention that was presented and authorized by the United Nations Security Council as a non-military and short-term humanitarian action to establish a no-fly zone and protect civilians is ever more brazenly proceeding as a colonialist war to overthrow the existing government and replace it with a regime of US and European agents and quislings.

Despite denials from Washington, London and Paris, preparations are well advanced for the introduction of ground troops. One of the factors delaying such action to date is the existence of sharp differences among the warring powers, driven by their internecine struggle over the division of the spoils in a post-Gaddafi Libya. The country is a major oil exporter and holds the largest petroleum reserves in all of Africa.

France, which was the most aggressive power in initiating the war and the only one to date among the major participants to recognize the Transitional National Council,

has sought from the first to play the dominant role in directing the military campaign. This has been fiercely resisted by the US and Britain, using NATO as their proxy.

The French Foreign Ministry on Friday declared that the European Union still plans to intervene militarily with ground forces, ostensibly to get humanitarian aid to Misrata. It is awaiting a request from the UN, a French spokeswoman said.

However, the *Financial Times* reported Friday, “A senior figure at the UK Ministry of Defense was also adamant that there is no possibility of the European Union launching ground forces in Libya to create a humanitarian corridor into Misurata.”

The logic of events, including internal tensions, is pushing the warring powers to escalate their military violence and ultimately introduce ground troops. Five weeks of intense bombing has weakened Gaddafi’s forces but failed to dislodge the regime, in large part because of the lack of mass popular support for the so-called rebels and the latter’s military incompetence.

Speaking to US troops in Baghdad, Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that American and European air strikes had depleted “somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of [Gaddafi’s] main ground forces,” which would suggest the elimination of thousands of soldiers. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the “coalition” had made only limited progress, saying, “It’s certainly moving towards a stalemate.”

This has prompted growing dissatisfaction among sections of the US political and foreign policy establishment with the policy of the Obama administration and demands for a more brutal escalation of the war. John McCain, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, traveled to Benghazi Friday to press his demand for more aggressive military action.

Calling the collection of former Gaddafi officials and long-time assets of the CIA and European intelligence agencies who dominate the Transitional National Council his “heroes,” McCain demanded stepped-up bombing of pro-Gaddafi forces and urged Washington to recognize the Transitional National Council as the sole legitimate government of Libya.

At a press conference in Benghazi, McCain said that nations should provide the council with “every appropriate means of assistance,” including “command and control support, battlefield intelligence, training and weapons.” He also urged the Obama administration to turn over some of the billions of dollars in Libyan assets it has seized to the so-called rebels.

The *Wall Street Journal* in an editorial Friday entitled “Coalition of the Ambivalent” echoed McCain’s position,

denouncing what it called “a half-hearted bombing campaign to stop Muammar Gaddafi’s forces in the name of preventing civilian deaths.” The newspaper demanded that Washington and NATO drop the pretense of a limited and “humanitarian” war and escalate the violence in order to eliminate the Gaddafi regime quickly.

Anthony Cordesman of the influential Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic & International Studies, revealed with bloodthirsty bluntness the real impulses behind the humanitarian mouthings. He wrote on April 20:

“The key problem is that farce is still being used as a substitute for force... There is no need for new UN resolutions, but France, Britain and the US and other participating members of the coalition that want to really help the Libyan people need to use the vagueness of the existing resolution to achieve decisive results.

“France, Britain, the US and other participating members of the coalition need to shift to the kind of bombing campaign that targets and hunts down Gaddafi’s military and security forces in their bases and as they move—as long before they engage rebel forces as possible. Gaddafi, his extended family, and his key supporters need to be targeted for their attacks on Libyan civilians, even if they are co-located in civilian areas. They need to be confronted with the choice between exile or death, and bombing needs to be intense enough so it is clear to them that they must make a choice as soon as possible.

“This kind of operation cannot be ‘surgical’—if ‘surgical’ now means minimizing bloodshed regardless of whether the patient dies. Hard, and sometimes brutal, choices need to be made...”

By the very nature of such imperialist enterprises, ever more “brutal choices” will inevitably be made to drown popular resistance to colonial-style domination in blood.

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