

Tripoli faces humanitarian crisis

By Bill Van Auken
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More than a week after the NATO-led “rebels” invaded the Libyan capital of Tripoli, the city’s 2 million residents are facing a deepening humanitarian crisis, deprived of water, electricity, adequate food supplies and desperately needed medical care.

While the downfall of the 42-year-old regime of Col. Muammar Gaddafi has been universally proclaimed, the whereabouts of Gaddafi himself are still not known. The principal leaders of the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC)—recognized by the major powers as the “legitimate” government of Libya—have yet to set foot in Tripoli.

Sporadic fighting continues to be reported in the capital, while NATO and the insurgent forces it has sponsored are preparing for a siege of Sirte, the coastal city of 100,000 that is Gaddafi’s home town and a center of his tribe, the Gaddafas.

NATO warplanes have conducted dozens of air strikes against Sirte, which straddles the highway leading from Tripoli in the west to Libya’s second largest city, Benghazi, to the east.

The pretense that this air war is being carried out under the United Nations mandate to protect Libyan civilians has become increasingly ludicrous as US, British and French warplanes are used to pound civilian population centers to prepare the way for invading “rebel” armies.

The head of the self-appointed NTC, Mustafa Abel Jalil, told a meeting of NATO envoys in Qatar Monday that the bombings should continue because “Gaddafi is still capable of doing something awful in the last moments.” He added that the ousted Libyan leader’s “defiance of the coalition forces still poses a danger, not only for Libya but for the world.”

Meanwhile, a United Nations watchdog web site published a leaked document that contains draft plans for a UN “peacekeeping” deployment in Libya, which would involve dispatching several hundred foreign military observers and police. The thrust of the UN mission, according to the 10-page document, would be to “contribute to confidence building and to the implementation of agreed military tasks.” The “confidence building,” it adds, “might be necessary for the troops of the Gaddafi government which will find themselves under the control of hostile forces.”

In other words, the key question perceived by the major powers is resurrecting the repressive apparatus of the Gaddafi

regime under new, and presumably more pliant, management. As for the “agreed military tasks,” primary among them would be disarming the population.

The document calls for 200 unarmed military observers and 190 UN police officers to be sent to Libya. The document adds, however, that if the stabilization of Tripoli required more “robust international assistance,” this would be beyond the UN’s capabilities. In that case, it states, “the only viable option to ensure a safe environment in Tripoli are the transitional authorities themselves, with the advice of those who are already assisting or advising them.”

It continues: “The Security Council’s ‘protection of civilians’ mandate implemented by NATO forces does not end with the fall of the Gaddafi government, and there, NATO would continue to have some responsibilities.”

The clear implication is that should NATO see the necessity of deploying ground troops in Libya for the purpose of “restoring order,” it could claim to be implementing the UN Security Council resolution for “protection of civilians,” even as it suppressed civilian opposition to a new Western-backed puppet regime.

Some have suggested that this dirty work be contracted out to Arab regimes, such as Qatar or the United Arab Emirates, likely bolstered by mercenaries hired through military contractors. The NTC’s Jalil has called for any foreign troops to be “Arab or Islamic.” Italy’s defense minister, Ignazio La Russa, recently expressed himself along similar lines, declaring, “We cannot rule out the presence of UN troops, so long as they come from Arab or African countries.”

The *Times* of London on Monday described the current situation in Tripoli as follows: “Seventy percent of the capital’s homes have no running water... Large parts of the city have little or no electricity. Fresh produce, milk and cooking gas are all but unattainable... At the zoo, keepers are cutting branches from trees to feed the hippopotamuses and monkeys and say they are short of water. ‘The animals are in danger,’ said one, Ali Abdullah Conti.

“Hospitals are running out of oxygen, fixators for treating fractures, and drugs for conditions such as diabetes... The city is filled with the stench of rubbish, and occasional corpses, rotting in the heat. Telephones work only intermittently. Most commercial life ceased months ago. Many people have no money left because the banks are shut and salaries have not

been paid.”

The continuing discovery of victims of massacres and summary executions across Tripoli has created an atmosphere of fear and terror in the Libyan capital. Reuters’ Peter Graff described the killings as “a harrowing warning that more carnage may lie ahead.”

“[A]s bodies lay in fetid piles in the streets of the capital this week,” Graff reported, “Libyans faced the prospect that, as in Iraq in 2003, the fall of a dictator could mark the beginning, rather than the end, of the war’s most violent phase.”

Referring to last week’s grim discovery of dozens of bodies of massacred Gaddafi supporters at a traffic circle outside the Libyan ruler’s compound, Graff wrote: “Since then, Reuters and other news organizations have found scores of other bodies in the capital, especially in Abu Salim, home to many Gadhafi government officials and their families. Friday brought the discovery of the abandoned Abu Salim hospital building, full of corpses lying on cots.

“The exact circumstances of the killings are still not clear, but these were not fighters left where they were killed on the battlefield. Gadhafi’s supporters will doubtlessly blame the rebels for carrying out large-scale revenge killings.”

The discovery of dozens more bodies in government jail cells, apparently massacred by Gaddafi’s security forces, has fueled the drive for revenge.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned Monday that the lack of drinking water, which extends well beyond Tripoli—from Misrata to the east and to the Tunisian border to the west—threatens to produce a serious public health crisis.

In addition to providing water, the ICRC has made it a priority to distribute body bags and train volunteers in “dead body management.”

The African Union Monday announced that it would withhold recognition of the National Transitional Council as Libya’s legitimate government because of the widespread killing and abuse of black African workers by the so-called “rebels.”

One of the facets of Tripoli’s crisis, the piling up of trash in the city’s streets, is directly attributable to these criminal pogroms. The overwhelming majority of the city’s sanitation workers are sub-Saharan African immigrants, who are now in hiding, in fear for their lives.

The African Union charged that the NATO-backed forces were indiscriminately rounding up and killing African migrants solely because of their skin color. It warned that the lives of tens of thousands of migrant workers were in danger, as “rebels” were branding people with black skins “mercenaries” and lynching them.

“We need clarification because the NTC seems to confuse black people with mercenaries... They are killing normal workers,” Jean Ping, the chairman of the Commission of the African Union told reporters in Ethiopia Monday. “[The rebels

seem to think] all blacks are mercenaries. If you do that it means [that] one-third of the population of Libya which is black is also mercenaries. They are killing people, normal workers, mistreating them.”

The NTC responded with a bald denial that any such killings or cases of abuse have taken place, despite their being confirmed by many news reports from the country. “This never took place,” said an NTC spokesman. “If it happened, it will be the Gaddafi forces.”

As the carnage continued to unfold, major Western energy conglomerates pressed for advantage in what they anticipate will be a profit bonanza from the NATO-led “regime change” in Libya. The National Transitional Council signed an agreement Monday with the state-backed Italian energy firm ENI calling for a “rapid and complete” resumption of the company’s activities in Libya. The memorandum of understanding was procured by the oil firm’s CEO, Paolo Scaroni, who went to Benghazi for the signing.

ENI was the largest producer operating in Libya before the NATO war. The company’s shares rose 3.1 percent on the announcement.

Meanwhile, the French government, the first to recognize the CNT, announced that it has reopened its embassy in Tripoli and a foreign ministry spokesman stressed that “there’s no time to lose” in promoting reconstruction in Libya. The government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, which will host a Libyan contact group meeting in Paris Thursday, is widely seen as pressing for advantage, particularly for the French oil giant Total, based on France’s aggressive posture in the war.

A column published in the Italian daily *La Stampa* on Sunday warned that France was preparing to switch from its military onslaught against Libya to “fighting a cold war to prevent Italian companies from winning back their priority positions in the network of oil wells” set up by ENI.

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