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Role of US, NATO under scrutiny in Libya

By *ROBERT BURNS* , 03.28.11, 05:13 PM EDT

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. and its NATO-led partners insist their mission in Libya goes no further than protecting civilians threatened by their own government's guns, but as rebels regain the initiative and push to the doorstep of Moammar Gadhafi's hometown of Sirte, the protectors in effect have become an aerial arm of the rebels.

The role of the international coalition is coming under greater scrutiny following weeklong airstrikes led by the U.S., France and Britain that helped the rebels take a critical step in their advance toward Tripoli, the capital.

The Pentagon's lead spokesman on Libya operations, Navy Vice Adm. William Gortney, told reporters Monday that the U.S. military is not coordinating with the rebels seeking Gadhafi's ouster. But he left little doubt that, by design or not, Western air power is propelling the rebels forward.

"Clearly they're achieving a benefit from the actions that we're taking," Gortney said. He displayed a chart that showed rebels advancing within 80 miles of Sirte, reflecting what he called a "pretty significant withdrawal" by pro-Gadhafi forces feeling the effects of relentless air attacks.

If the purpose of the U.N.-sanctioned military action is to protect civilians, does that include pro-Gadhafi civilians who are likely to be endangered in places like Sirte that are in the rebels' crosshairs? If not, it is difficult to see the Western intervention as a neutral humanitarian act not aligned with the rebels.

The first goal of the intervention was to prevent a massacre of civilians in Benghazi, the eastern Libyan city where Gadhafi forces were threatening to crush the rebellion two weeks ago. Gadhafi said he would "show no mercy."

That goal was quickly accomplished with a U.S.-led assault. A no-fly zone was established two weekends ago with little resistance. The U.S. and its partners then

launched airstrikes on Gadhafi supply lines and other military targets not only near Benghazi but around other contested areas as well.

But the role of Western air power then went beyond that initial humanitarian aim, to in effect provide air cover for the rebels while pounding Gadhafi forces in a bid to break their will or capacity to fight.

Gortney disclosed that over the weekend U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt aircraft, designed to provide battlefield support to friendly ground forces, flew attack missions for the first time in this conflict. He refused to say where they flew or provide other details. Also joining the battle, he said, were Air Force AC-130 gunships, a low-flying aircraft armed with a 105mm howitzer and a 40mm cannon. Those two types of aircraft give the U.S. more ability to confront pro-Gadhafi forces in urban areas with less risk of civilian casualties.

Military officials have been careful to say their jurisdiction stops at protecting civilians, since that is the mandate of the United Nations on March 17. President Barack Obama has gone further, saying that Gadhafi is an illegitimate ruler who must step aside, and the Obama administration has struggled to explain the different rationales to the public and Congress.

U.S. officials are leery of appearing to intervene in a civil war, and mindful that to maintain Arab and U.N. support the mission must not look like overt meddling by outsiders. It remained unclear how far the NATO intervention will go, now that the rebels are again on the offensive and Gadhafi's forces seem to be in retreat. Obama said Monday, hours before addressing the nation on Libya, that U.S. involvement will be "limited, both in time and scope."

How best to help the opposition will be a topic at a major international conference on Libya's political future on Tuesday in London. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was representing the United States.

In his first news conference since assuming command of the Libya operation as commander of NATO's Allied Joint Force Command, Canadian Lt. Gen. Charles Bouchard on Monday said NATO was not taking sides.

Asked where NATO drew the line between protecting the civilians and aiding rebels, Bouchard said his mission was clear:

"Our goal is to protect and help the civilians and population centers under the threat of attack," he said.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said Monday that Royal Air Force pilots destroyed 22 of Gadhafi forces' tanks, armored vehicles and heavy guns over the weekend around Ajdabiya in the east and Misrata in the west.

The U.S. Marine Corps said its Harrier attack planes flying off the USS Kearsarge in the Mediterranean attacked Libyan tanks and armored personnel carriers near Misrata, a contested coastal city east of Tripoli.

The U.S., at the direction of its African Command chief, Gen. Carter Ham, had been overseeing that mission. But on Sunday NATO's 28 member nations agreed to take it over - a transition expected to take at least a few days. The United States will retain a substantial role.

NATO officials have said the alliance's operations, approved for up to three months, could be extended if necessary.

Several NATO countries have said they would impose conditions on the use of their air and naval forces. Some, like the Netherlands, have said they will only take part in air patrols but would not participate in attacks on ground targets.

The U.N. Security Council approved "all necessary measures" to protect "civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack," and excluded "a foreign occupation force of any form." Obama has repeatedly ruled out inserting ground troops.

U.S. officials have been considering the idea of supplying the rebels with military assistance but, along with whether to recognize the opposition's transitional council as Libya's legitimate government, have yet to reach a decision.

"No decision has been made about that at this point," Gates said on Sunday.

On Friday, U.S. ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz, said both political and military assistance were being discussed. Cretz retains his title although the U.S. has suspended normal diplomatic operations in Tripoli and sent diplomats home.

"I can just say that we're (talking about) the full gamut of potential assistance that we might offer, both on the non-lethal and the lethal side," he said. It "is a subject of discussion within the U.S. government, but there has been no final decisions made on any aspect of that."

In explaining the U.S. rationale for using air power against Gadhafi's ground forces, Navy Vice Adm. William Gortney told reporters at the Pentagon last Friday that protecting Libyan civilians "is really the larger purpose" of the U.N. resolution.

"From a military perspective, we treat it as a distinct mission ... requiring the use of air-to-ground attacks on regime forces," he said, "since it is from these attacks that the civilian populace is most harmed."

Critics have said the Western military campaign goes far beyond what was authorized by the U.N. On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the international air

campaign breached the U.N. resolution and amounted to international interference in what he called Libya's civil war.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the [Cato](#) ([CTR](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) Institute, a libertarian think tank, wrote on his blog Monday that the U.N. requirement to protect civilians could last even if Gadhafi were to go.

"If the rebels seize power and then turn their guns on former regime supporters, the U.S. military may find itself in the middle of a bloody civil war, as it did in Iraq," Preble wrote.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who was silent last week about the Libyan operation, said on the Senate floor that Obama has failed to explain the mission.

"The president has articulated a wider political objective of regime change in Libya that is not the stated objective of our military intervention," the Kentucky lawmaker said, "nor is it the mandate of the U.N. resolution that the president has used as a justification for our military efforts there."

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