

U.S. rescue chopper shoots six Libyan villagers as they welcome pilots of downed Air Force jet

By [Daily Mail Reporter](#)

Last updated at 8:51 PM on 22nd March 2011

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Six Libyan villagers are recovering in hospital after being shot by American soldiers coming in to rescue the U.S. pilots whose plane crash-landed in a field.

The helicopter strafed the ground as it landed in a field outside Benghazi beside the downed U.S. Air Force F-15E Eagle which ran into trouble during bombing raid last night.

And a handful of locals who had come to greet the pilots were hit - among them a young boy who may have to have a leg amputated because of injuries caused by a bullet wound.

The first confirmed casualties of the allied operation, the Channel Four's International Editor Lindsey Hilsum confirmed the civilian casualties.

The crew of the fighter plane had enjoyed a miraculous escape after suffering suspected mechanical failure during the third night of air strikes on Colonel Gaddafi's military positions.

As one crew member was surrounded by locals, he held his arms out, calling 'okay, okay', according to the Evening Standard - but the grateful Libyans queued to thank him and give him juice.



Crashed: Onlookers surround the wreckage of a U.S Air Force F-15E fighter jet after it crashed near the eastern city of Benghazi



Ruins: The fighter jet crashed in Libya overnight after apparent mechanical failure. Both men ejected safely and escaped with only minor injuries

Younis Amruni told the newspaper: 'I hugged him and said "Don't be scared, we are your friends". We are so grateful to these men who are protecting the skies.'

The plane, based at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk, had set off from Aviano in Italy but came down at Bu Mariem, some 24 miles east of Benghazi.

The jet's wreckage is set to be recovered or destroyed by the Americans, to prevent the plane coming into Gaddafi's hands, while the crew were seen by a doctor in the rebel stronghold before being taken to a U.S. ship.



Downed: F15E Eagle fighter jet, similar to that lost in Libya last night and anti-aircraft fire lighting up the night sky over Tripoli



The U.S. military confirmed an Air Force F-15 Strike Eagle crashed in Libya but it was not shot down, while Vince Crawley, a spokesman for the Africa Command, said both crew members ejected and sustained minor injuries.

Gauging the reaction of locals in the area, Hilsum said 'the local Libyans do not seem resentful, they still want the coalition forces to keep operating'.

The incident is an embarrassment all round for the coalition, which had been met by strong anti-aircraft fire over Tripoli last night.

However, the U.S. did managed to fire 20 Tomahawk cruise missiles into Libya in the past 12 hours, a military spokeswoman confirmed today.



A Libyan naval military facility damaged by last night's air strikes in eastern Tripoli



Anti-aircraft fire and explosions reverberated across Tripoli for a third night on Monday and state television said several sites had come under attack in the capital



People look at a crater in the destroyed Boussetta Libyan navy base a day after it was bombarded some 10 kilometres east of Tripoli

Details also emerged of Britain's Tomahawk cruise missile attack on Gaddafi's presidential compound in Tripoli, destroying a military command and control centre, while up to 800 Royal Marines were placed on standby to move to the Mediterranean.

A total of 159 Tomahawks have been fired by the United States and the United Kingdom since the mission -- called Operation Odyssey Dawn -- began on Saturday.

'We think we have been very effective in degrading his ability to control his regime forces,' said General Carter Ham, commander of U.S. Africa Command.

Gaddafi went on the offensive today on the ground in Libya. A doctor in Misrata said loyalist tanks were in the streets and snipers controlled the main roadway in Misrata, with international forces not implementing the no-fly zone in the coastal city.



Locals check out the wreckage of the F15E and pick up mementos from the crash site



People look at components of AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles from the F-15E fighter



Young boys wearing old Libyan flags climb on the wreckage in their dungaree fatigues

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The doctor, speaking anonymously, said nine people were killed this morning, including a fellow medic and his four children who were shot by snipers.

'Snipers are everywhere in Misrata, shooting anyone who walks by while the world is still watching. There is no protection for civilians,' he said.

Mokhtar Ali, a Libyan dissident in exile, said he was in touch with his father in the town and described increasingly dire conditions.

'Residents live on canned food and rainwater tanks,' he said. Gaddafi's brigades storm residential areas knowing that they won't be bombed there. 'People live in total darkness in terms of communications and electricity.'

In Ajdabiyah, a rebel commander who defected from the Libyan special forces said professional ex-soldiers had poured into the area and the nearby oil port city of Brega, encircling the Gaddafi forces to disrupt their supply lines under Western air cover.

'If not for the West we would not have been able to push forward,' said Ahmed Buseifi. 'I'm pinpointing where their forces are and their tanks and passing it up the chain of command.'

Today, a British Government minister refused to rule out the deployment of ground troops in Libya.

Armed Forces Minister Nick Harvey said there was a clear distinction between sending in a full-scale occupation force - which is banned under the terms of the United Nations mandate - and a more limited intervention.

He insisted the air strikes were aimed at military targets.

Asked on BBC Breakfast how long the conflict was likely to last, Mr Harvey answered: 'How long is a piece of string?'

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He then added: 'We don't know if this is going to result in a stalemate. We don't know if his capabilities are going to be degraded quickly. Ask me again in a week.'

He also accepted that Libya could be left with a stalemate in which left the country divided and Col Gaddafi still holding power in Tripoli.



Rebellion: Rebel fighters firing missiles against the Libyan leader's forces in a desert near Ajdabiya



Show of unity: Dr Liam Fox, Secretary of State for Defence, arrives in Downing Street today ahead of a Cabinet Meeting alongside General Sir David Richards

'That is one possible outcome,' he said.

'If it is, so be it, that wouldn't be desirable. But a stable outcome where they weren't killing each other would in a sense be one way of achieving the humanitarian objective.'

It was a stance echoed by the lead U.S. commander Army Gen. Carter Ham, who said it was possible that Gaddafi might manage to retain power.

'I don't think anyone would say that is ideal,' the general said, foreseeing a possible outcome that contrasts with his President's opinion that Gaddafi should be toppled.

The coalition is finding it difficult however, to present a united front over the vexing question of who should continue to lead the operation.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini reiterated a warning today that Italy would take back control of airbases it has authorised for use by allies for operations over Libya unless a NATO coordination structure was agreed.

Italian officials have described the current three-way command structure involving France, Britain and the United States and the resulting bombing campaign as 'anarchic'.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi also added to the calls for the operation to be handed over to NATO and said: 'For us it is essential the mission of the no fly zone is clearly defined, from the embargo to the protection of civilians.

'The operational command must pass to NATO or be coordinated differently from how it is at the moment.'

U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has already said Britain or France could take charge of the air operation, or NATO could lead it, if sensitivities in the Arab League over working under NATO leadership were assuaged.



A Libyan rebel vehicle in front of billowing smoke as Libyan forces loyal to Leader Muammar Gaddafi attack the road between Ajdabiya and Benghazi

HAGUE: DESIRE FOR FREEDOM WILL SPREAD THROUGH AFRICA

William Hague today predicted other countries in Africa would see uprisings similar to those in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

The Foreign Secretary pulled no punches as he predicted the regimes in Zimbabwe and Ivory Coast might be undone by their unhappy peoples.

'Just as Gaddafi is an obstacle to the peaceful development of Libya, there are some others who stand in the way of a brighter future for their countries,' Mr Hague said, citing Robert Mugabe and Laurent Gbagbo, who has clung on to power despite electoral defeat.

'The action we have taken in Libya, authorised by the United Nations Security Council, shows that the international community does take gross violations of human rights extremely seriously.'

Mr Hague, speaking at a conference of African leaders and businessmen in London, said the North African revolutions were the most significant political events of the 21st century so far.

'We are only in the early stages of what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East. It is already set to overtake the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11 as the most important development of the early 21st century, and is likely to bring some degree of political change in all countries in the Arab world.

'This is a historic shift of massive importance, presenting the international community as a whole with an immense opportunity.'

However, some analysts and NATO officials question whether France or Britain would be capable of coordinating a complex multinational air mission.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said on Monday that NATO should take charge of a no-fly zone, given its 'tried and tested machinery in command and control'.

However, France has raised the problem of the alliance's poor reputation in the Arab world as a result of the war in Afghanistan and the perception that NATO is dominated by the United States.

Senior French analyst Francois Heisbourg said the best outcome would be to have NATO handle military co-ordination but hand political decisions to an ad hoc council of states participating in the coalition, including Arab countries.

Germany, Turkey, the Arab League and the African Union have also come out against a NATO umbrella.

And Algeria called for an immediate end to Western military intervention in the neighbouring country, the state news agency reported.

'We judge this intervention to be disproportionate in relation to the objective set out by the United Nations Security Council resolution,' the APS news agency quoted Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci as saying. '(We demand) an immediate cessation of hostilities and foreign intervention.'

The situation is complicated by the Italian annoyance with the attitude of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who led the diplomatic drive for the Security Council resolution.

Gianpiero Cantoni, head of the Italian Senate's defence affairs committee, was quoted in the Corriere della Sera daily as saying that French policy appeared to be motivated by a desire to secure oil contracts with a future Libyan government, while Italy would have to face a potential flood of refugees.

Meanwhile, two Qatari fighter jets and a transport aircraft expected to participate in the no-fly zone over Libya left for Crete today after an unexpected hiccup.

The aircraft had to make an unscheduled refuelling stop in Cyprus but were initially denied permission to land.

It was only when the pilots of the two Mirage jets and a C-17 cargo plane said they were running out of fuel that they were allowed to touch down on Cypriot tarmac.

European and U.S. forces have sent warplanes against Libyan targets under a UN Security Council resolution authorising military action to protect civilians from leader Muammar Gaddafi's forces.

But Cyprus, which hosts two British bases, has said it does not want any involvement in military operations over Libya.

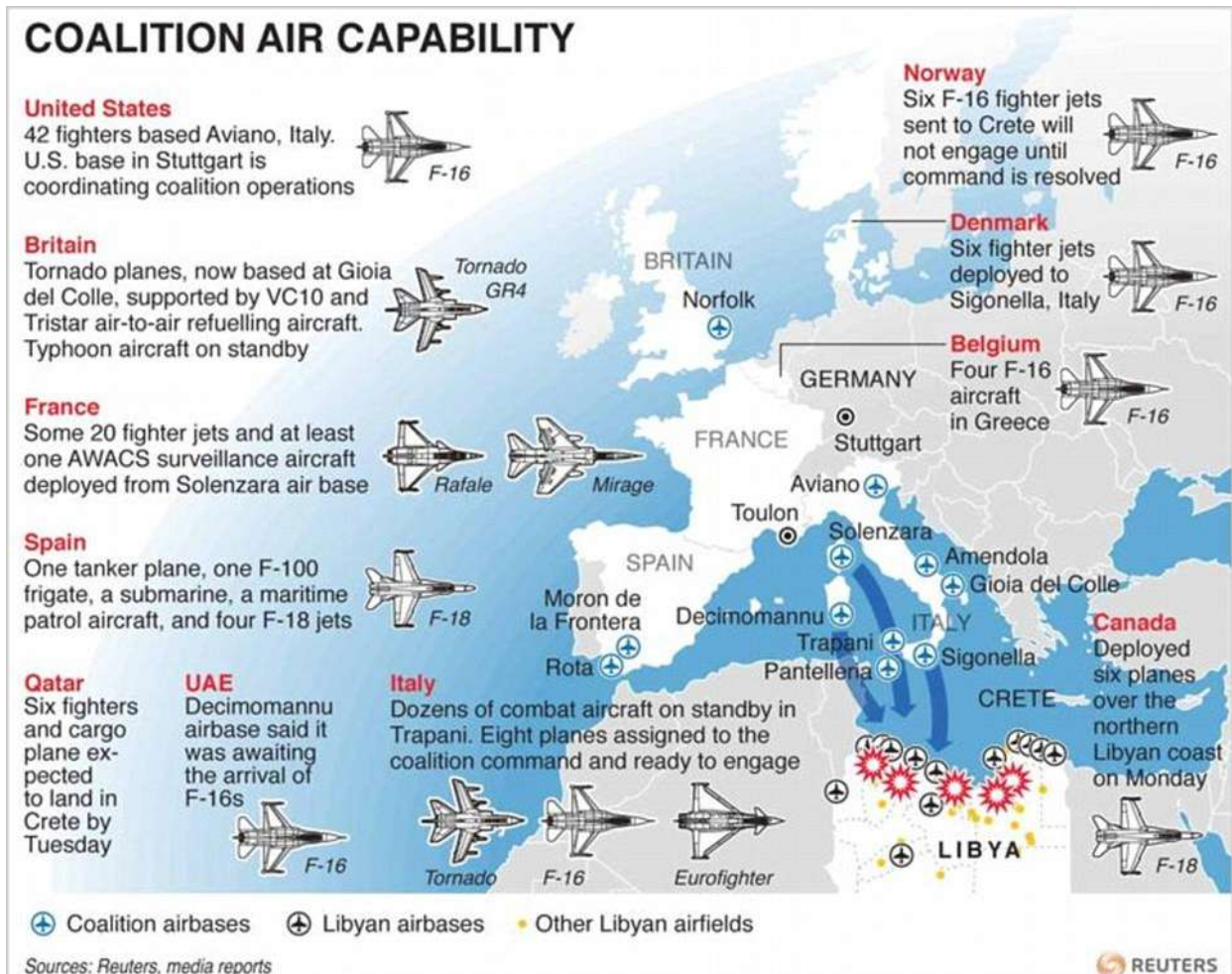
President Demetris Christofias said on Sunday that his government opposed any use of the British bases on the island to enforce the no-fly zone, but conceded it had no power to stop their involvement.



Ready to go: RAF Typhoons prepare for take off at Gioia del Colle airbase, Italy, ahead of tonight's enforcement of the no-fly zone



Two Qatari Mirage jet fighters are seen at the tarmac of the old Larnaca airport where they stopped for emergency refuelling on their way to a U.S. military base in Crete



Yemen's President warns of civil war threat

The President of Yemen warned today that his country would descend into civil war if he is forced to resign.

In a speech to army officers and tribal leaders, President Ali Abdullah Saleh said his country would face disintegration because of efforts to stage what he called a 'coup' against his rule.

'You have an agenda to tear down the country, the country will be divided into three instead of two halves. A southern part, northern part and a middle part. This is what is being sought by defectors against the unity,' he said, referring to northern Shi'ite rebels and al Qaeda militants.



Defiant: Yemeni anti-government protesters in Sanaa chant slogans and show off posters demanding the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh

'Those who want to climb up to power through coups should know that this is out of the question. The homeland will not be stable, there will be a civil war, a bloody war. They should carefully consider this,' he said.

An aide to the President said following the speech that Saleh would only leave after organising parliamentary polls by January 2012 and he refused to hand over power without knowing who would succeed him.

'The President has said he will hand over power through (parliamentary) elections and the formation of democratic institutions at the end of 2011 or January 2012,' Ahmed al-Sufi told Reuters.

'Ali Abdullah Saleh does not seek power. Ali Abdullah Saleh will not leave without knowing who he is handing over to.'

However the opposition movement swiftly rejected Saleh's offer to stay until January 2012. The coming hours would be 'decisive', Mohammed al-Sabry, a key opposition spokesman, said.

Meanwhile, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has also voiced public alarm about the situation in Yemen.

Me Gates said that he was concerned about the instability in Yemen before adding that he was anxious to avoid 'diversion of attention' from al Qaeda cells operating there.