

Sirte destroyed by NTC-NATO offensive in Libya

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The Libyan town of Sirte has been all but destroyed and its inhabitants turned into homeless refugees. This situation has gone largely unreported, but those press reports that have emerged paint a picture of a city being reduced to ruins by attacks of the National Transitional Council (NTC) “rebels” and NATO bombing raids against which it has no defense.

“After weeks of intense fighting, Moammar Gaddafi’s home town appeared Saturday to have been largely destroyed, with most of its population fled and holes the size of manhole covers blown in apartment buildings and the ousted leader’s showcase convention center,” writes the *Washington Post* of Muammar Gaddafi’s coastal hometown of around 100,000 residents.

Once considered to be a showpiece of urban development in Libya, Sirte has been the target of NATO bombing and NTC attacks since shortly after the fall of Tripoli in late August. In the last ten days, it has been the object of an intensified offensive. The *Post* states that “the damage wreaked in Sirte raises the question of whether its residents will go quietly into the post-Gaddafi future—or retain a smouldering anger that could fuel an insurgency.”

The *Telegraph* in Britain, which backs Gaddafi’s ouster, nevertheless comments that Sirte, which once had “a brilliant panoply of university and hospitals, with a glittering seafront and a marble-lined conference centre to host leaders from around the world,” is now “a squalid ruin.”

“Rebel fighters gazing at the devastation concede it is difficult to see how much of it could ever be repaired and made habitable again,” it notes. “The shattered remains of housing blocks and the wreckage of once comfortable homes...are more reminiscent of the grimmest scenes from Grozny, towards the end of Russia’s bloody Chechen war, than of anything seen in Libya so far. And the area around the grid of streets where anything between 200

and 500 loyalists are still holding out have become a killing ground, with loyalists, civilians and forces of the new Libyan government dying by the day.”

Former residents who have returned “found almost every house and building either damaged by a rocket or mortar, burned out or riddled with bullets. Water floods the streets and the city’s infrastructure is in tatters,” writes *Reuters*.

These events shatter the pretences on which the NATO war against Libya was launched—i.e. claims that the possibility that Gaddafi might carry out mass reprisals against protesters justified a NATO intervention to disarm him. Far from planning reprisals against defenceless protesters, the Libyan army soon faced a war in which they were outclassed by NATO forces intervening to support the “rebels.” Reports from Sirte now suggest that the NTC forces are now carrying out collective punishment in the city.

Reuters comments: “the ferociousness of the bombardment of Sirte and the burning of homes that belong to Gaddafi family members and supporters has raised suspicions that some fighters loyal to the NTC are looking for reprisals.” It cited residents returning to Sirte and accusing NTC fighters “of demolishing and looting homes, shops and public buildings.”

“They envy and hate us because Muammar is from here. But we are just civilians. The revolutionaries are coming here for revenge and destruction,” said a Sirte resident.

Another resident, Abu Anas, states: “What’s happening in Sirte is revenge, not liberation. When someone comes and takes your personal car and destroys your home, this is not liberation.”

NTC forces “clearly feel no need for restraint in bombarding the Gaddafi loyalists. That’s especially true of the many fighters from Misrata, a city to the west scarred by a bloody siege by Gaddafi’s troops in the spring,” the *Post* comments.

Numerous reports indicate that the NTC forces are looting the town. “Orders from the National Transitional Council to outlaw looting have done nothing to deter the rebel stragglers gutting abandoned buildings,” the *Telegraph* states.

Reuters reporters saw NTC fighters “roaming the streets of Sirte with chairs, tyres and computers on the backs of their pickup trucks. Brand new BMW and Toyota cars were seen being driven away by the fighters and being towed outside of the city.”

Associated Press reporters “also saw trucks carrying equipment from Sirte’s airport, including red-carpeted mobile staircases, baggage carts, airplane towing vehicles and security screening equipment, all apparently meant for Misrata’s badly damaged airport. Smaller pickups were loaded with rugs, freezers, refrigerators, furniture and other household goods, apparently taken by civilians and fighters to be used in their homes or resold.”

Tens of thousands of residents have fled the city. However, Gabriele Rossi, the emergency coordinator in Sirte for the Doctors without Borders charity organisation, told the *Washington Post* that doctors fear thousands of civilians may be trapped in the areas of the city still being contested: “We are extremely concerned for those people that are inside [Sirte] and cannot get access to health care.”

A doctor for Doctors without Borders in Sirte has estimated that 10,000 people remain trapped in the city, including women and children, some sick or injured.

According to CNN, Doctors without Borders personnel working at the Ibn Sina hospital are still dealing with 50 patients yet to be evacuated. They are “mostly people who have suffered violent trauma, severe burns and fractures, according to MSF. Almost all patients need daily dressing and immediate medical care. There are also some pregnant women in the hospital.

“There is no water supply in the hospital and one of four operating theatres has been shelled,” the charity said. “The medical staff has been working around the clock and are showing signs of exhaustion and post-traumatic stress disorder.”

The total number of dead and injured in the onslaught cannot be determined. Information is scantier still regarding Bani Walid, also under NTC/NATO siege for weeks, which the NTC now claims to have captured.

The destruction of Sirte is a fitting testament to the true character of NATO’s “humanitarian intervention” into Libya. Begun with claims that military bombardment would save Benghazi, the illegal war of aggression has

instead laid waste to large swaths of the country.

As for reconstruction, there are already indications that the imperialist powers intend to use the funds they have earmarked for Libya for further fighting, not rebuilding the devastated country.

Reuters reported this week that the emergency “relief fund” set up in a Qatari account to circumvent sanctions—now worth over half a billion US dollars—will no longer be available “for providing emergency cash” and will be used “to invest in long-term projects... Thousands of Libyans fleeing fighting in the besieged cities of Sirte and Bani Walid are straining the resources of struggling nearby towns, but the emergency relief fund set up by foreign donors says it is no longer its job to help.”

In reality, only \$130 million of the \$500 million Temporary Financing Mechanism has been released and this has covered fuel, hospital bills and salaries.

Local authorities “say they have only received a fraction of the money they need to cope with the flood of families escaping the fighting” in Sirte and Bani Walid. “In Tripoli, officials said the capital’s resources were also being tested by the arrival of thousands of internally displaced people and more money was needed to provide services in the capital.”

A local official said Tripoli has only actually received a paltry 15 million dinars, or \$12.2 million.

“Most of Libya’s estimated \$170 billion in frozen assets are still out of reach, and despite pledges by global powers to make money available, just one third of a promised \$15 billion has been unfrozen,” the report concludes.

Yesterday UK Foreign Secretary William Hague was in Tripoli to reopen Britain’s embassy, which was looted and torched in May in angry response to NATO’s air strikes. He marked this “watershed” moment with a promise of a paltry £20 million (\$32 million) for Libya’s stabilisation fund, another £20 million to support “political and economic reform,” and health care in the UK for at most 50 Libyans injured in the war.



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